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THE GOLD HUNTERS OF MEXICO: OR, THE PRAIRIE PHANTOM.

By H. C. EMMET.



"One!" he called, loudly and distinctly. He was to call "three," and at the word "three" both combatants were to fire. "Two!"

CHAPTER I.

"SHALL we not find a shelter to-night, sir? I wish I hadn't come." The speaker, a delicate-looking boy, lifted his beautiful blue eyes as he uttered these words timidly and petulantly. He sat erect on his mustang, with the glow of the setting sun falling upon his flossy golden hair.

"I hope not, Rutland," answered his companion, a handsome military looking young man, who gracefully rode a tall Kentucky horse. "Boswell's Ranch cannot be far away now. Are you tired?"

"Yes; I am not so used to riding as Owen, Mr. Digby." "Do not mention that name," said Mr. Digby, his face clouding. "He is a reprobate and a vagabond!"

"Don't say that, Mr. Digby," cried the boy, with a flush on his face. "Owen is my only brother—"

"Pish!" a nice brother, who will take a child like you from a good home and bring you out to the interior of Texas; but come, I see Boswell's Ranch down there in the valley," and Mr. Digby, who was mounted on a stout Kentucky stallion, rode ahead.

The boy rode a shaggy little mustang, full of grit and sinew, and he rode it like one who had, so to speak, been born in the saddle.

Mr. Digby found himself deceived by the distance, and it was night ere he drew up before Boswell's Ranch.

"What a noise! inside. What can it be?" said Rutland, in his timid way.

A noise is scarcely the word for it. Had they suddenly come upon the Tower of Babel, or Babel and all its inhabitants, they would not have heard a greater din, laughter, shouts, cheers, and some stray cursing, all intermingled in such an uproar as to considerably startle the cool-nerved Mr. Digby.

"Dismount, Rutland," said that gentleman, as he tethered the horses to a ringbolt in the gate, and then taking the boy by the hand, he pushed open the door of the ranch and entered.

"Hullo, there! another to join the expedition," cried a stentorian voice, and Mr. Digby found himself the observed of nearly a score of reckless men.

"I fear not, gentlemen; I have intruded here to beg of Mr. Boswell a night's lodging for myself and companion."

"Any man's welcome to Boswell's ranch," said the same stentorian voice, and Boswell in person stepped out from the motley crowd of Bacchannals.

He was a fine specimen of human flesh and blood—six feet three inches in height, broad and deep-chested, with a great expanse of hips, a massive throat bronzed by the sun, and handsome face adorned with an immense mustache and pointed chin—better understood as an imperial. His eyes were very large, very bright and light, and deeply shaded with dark lashes that a belle would have envied.

Mr. Digby could not conceal his admiration as he told who he was and what he wanted.

"You're welcome, stranger," said Boswell, extending his hand; "you'll sup and join us in a glass. I guess you've had a mighty long ride from Muloch's."

"Thanks; I am beastly played out," replied Digby, and now his accent and form of speech proclaimed his nationality at once—English.

He sat down at the far end of the table with little Rutland at his side, and studied the company while he ate. All the men drank freely, and spoke to Boswell as "Captain Boz," and Digby soon learned that they had formed a company to go gold hunting in Mexico with some Mexicans not present.

"Wouldn't you like to join us?" said Boswell cordially.

"Very much—but—" and here Mr. Digby glanced at the boy and shrugged his shoulders, and Rutland by that silent gesture was brought into notice.

Boswell was about to make some inquiries, when his ears caught the sound of horses' hoofs clattering up to the door, but before he could reach the threshold, it was flung open and a lad of most striking appearance confronted him.

He demands a word from us.

Behold our hero!

Tall, and of athletic build, his splendid physique showed as much strength as grace, and it was very graceful. His face was pale—complexion dark, though it was less so, framed, as it was, by a cluster of dark, glossy curls which hung in twisted masses upon his shoulders. His eyes were large, oval and black, deeply fringed with lashes the color of a raven's wing, and there was a gloomy fire slumbering in them that spoke of a dauntless nature.

Blatant and glaring as the lad's poverty was, it shone through the features and the form of unconquerable pride.

There was a wild beauty in his very haggardness and fiercely-independent and haughty mien—a savage grandeur that would paralyze the hand of charity, and make those who would be his master become his slave.

For a moment he glared around him, and the gloomy fire in his eyes burst into a blaze of passion as he caught sight of Rutland and Digby, neither of whom had seen him yet.

He startled the whole company by the fearful cry he uttered, as he leaped across the room, flung himself upon Digby, and gripped him by the throat.

"Hound—midnight thief! would you rob me of what is dearer than life?" he cried, in such a frenzy of fury that his voice rang out like that of a strong man.

"Take him off!" howled Digby, as the lad bore him down, while Rutland, starting up, shrank back, crying.

"Owen—Owen!"

"Villain!" cried the infuriated youth, "whence came you? what devil sent you here? Is there no place in this wide world that will shield him? Speak, you dastard!"

Digby was a strong and well-knit man, and he struggled to get free, but the boy held him as in a vise, and was choking him.

The men recovering from their momentary stupor jumped up, and Boswell, who had been too terror-stricken to avert what he had never anticipated, went to Digby's rescue, and his face was black with passion as he tore the lad away.

"What!" he thundered; "is it blood you want? God's word! am I to have the hospitality of my house outraged like this!" and he flung the lad aside so forcibly that, dazed with frenzy as he was, he would have fallen had not Rutland, with a cry, thrown himself into his brother's arms.

"Oh, Owen—dear Owen! what are you doing?" he cried, terrified to tears.

"He shall see!" hissed Digby, as he arose and caught up his heavily-loaded riding-whip. "Reprobate, vagabond, you shall suffer for this!" and he took a step forward.

"Oh, no—no!" almost shrieked Rutland, turning his beautiful face upon the assembly, and throwing his arms around his brother's neck; "don't let him touch Owen, dear—dear Owen, my brother—my brother!" he almost sobbed.

The classic but impassioned features of Owen softened as he took his little brother in his arms, hugged him as vehemently as a tigress would her young, and kissed him as tenderly as a mother would her first born.

"Stand aside, Daisy—pretty boy," he said, so gently that the roughest of the men present looked into each other's eyes, deeply affected at the scene, and Boswell, with a quivering lip, stood before Digby.

"Stranger," he said, "no violence under my roof; not a step, sir! I must know a little more of this."

"Oh, Owen!"

"Hush, Daisy." And then, passionately and chokingly, "Daisy—Daisy, you will not let them take you from me; say you won't. They shall not rob me of you, so help me Heaven!"

The sublime sense of devotion of the dark, proud, and passionate Owen for the fragile, beautiful boy, so unlike him in all save love, clinging to him with a tearful faith that might have been expected only from a timid girl, touched the one soft place in the hearts of those reckless men, and many a hand sought a weapon, and as many faces were turned menacingly towards Digby.

"Put that thar whip down, stranger!" said one whom the rest had called Black Wolf, and Digby put the whip down.

Boswell repeated very deliberately these words:

"I must know a little more of this," and added, "we'll give you the floor, stranger."

"I can only repeat that that boy is a reprobate," said Digby, "whose revengeful pride led him to tear that child from his mother's family, where all that wealth could obtain was given him, to drag him down in defiance of humanity and justice."

"In defiance of charity," retorted Owen, the latent fire blazing once more in his grand and gloomy eyes. "The charity that was withheld from our mother when she was dying of want and a broken heart, after being foully wronged by my dead father's people. This child was placed in my care by my mother on her death-bed, and I swore to work for him, to love and protect him, to hurl back the charity that she dreaded would be offered him when she was no more. I kept my word, and though I have suffered almost starvation for him, he has never wanted, and you—you—paid emissary of my father's relatives, come like a thief in the night and steal him from me while I am absent."

"Ask the boy himself," replied Digby.

"Rutland, you want to go to your uncle, but you must renounce one who is a disgrace to both families, and to you."

"Will you leave me, Daisy?" asked Owen, looking down with the softened look once more upon his face, and his breast heaving. "Speak, little one; if you prefer to go, I will even tear my heart out for you."

"No—no; Owen, dear Owen, I will stay with you. Dearest brother—"

"God bless you, Daisy!" exclaimed Owen, fervently, and the men cheered.

"That settles it," said Boswell. "What is your name?"

"Owen Memphis."

"That is his mother's," put in Digby.

"They robbed me of my father's," said Owen, "and I take hers till my mission is fulfilled."

"Stranger," said Boswell, "you're my guest, and you'll be mighty welcome till the morning, but—" and he drew himself up, and raised one hand, pointing it at the two brothers, "by the God above us, you don't part them!"

CHAPTER II.

GIVING TWO THRILLING SCENES IN THE DRAMA OF OUR HERO'S LIFE.

SCENE ONE—IN THE BURNING RANCH.

A CHANGE came over Digby in an instant. He

shut his lips hard, his cheeks paled, and a sinister gleam was in his eyes, as he said, resentfully: "Thank you for your hospitality, but I will trespass upon it no further. Finche's farm is only five miles from here. I will ride over to it."

And with a look at Owen that meant mischief, he strode out, and a dead and ominous stillness followed his departure.

Owen Memphis had sunk into a seat, and with little Rutland's golden head pillowed on his shoulder, drooped his own pale face upon it.

Boswell looked at the boys, then at the company, the company looked at each other, then at the drinking cups, and still not a whisper.

Such a scene as they had witnessed was a revelation to them, men who had passed the best part of their lives on the border.

Boswell at last took a silent drink, and the rest followed suit. Boswell gave a preliminary cough, and began:

"Say, lad, you're a derved plucky feller, and I ain't going to ask for your story to-night, nor at all, lest maybe ye care to tell me, but wasn't you one of Muloch's ranchmen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Derved if I didn't think so. Boys, thet young feller's the best horseman in Texas. Wal, yer going back to-morrow, lad?"

"No, sir; I never more enter under the roof of the man who gave Rutland up to a stranger."

"Wal, mebbe ye're right, sonny. D'ye think ye'd like to jine our expedition?"

"I could not take him," answered Owen, "he would only be a care, and I cannot leave him."

"Well, youngsters," said Boswell, "sup and I'll show ye to my own sleeping quarters; we'll talk in the morning."

Morning, only a few brief hours yet; who could even dream of what terrible change the morning would bring forth.

Boswell's "sleeping quarters" was a small compartment in a corner at the back of the ranch. Owen Memphis did not lie down until he had watched Rutland fall asleep, and even then he sat brooding over dark and gloomy thoughts, and the dead stillness of the night made him drowsy, and he lay down.

He was more fatigued than he really knew, and slumbered heavily; but even in his sleep he tossed about uneasily, and seemed suffocating and hot.

There was a stifling sensation in his nostrils and throat, a burning brand of iron seemed to be pressing against his temples, a strange and lurid light glaring before his eyes, and presently he awoke with a start.

"What's this?" he gasped, as he rubbed his aching eyelids and coughed violently. "Smoke—ah, FIRE—oh, God, Rutland!"

He staggered up, and, still dazed, reeled towards the door. At the very moment he opened it there came a muffled explosion, and a sea of flame arose before him, while a wild commotion in the large room announced that the company were alarmed and on the alert.

"Fire!" he screamed, again, and rushed back to the bed, and aroused Rutland, and snatched him up in his arms.

Then arose a fearful din, yells, and shouts, and curses. The smoke dispersed, and more flames took its place; which way should he turn. He dared not go by the door, the wall behind him was in flames.

"Help!" he cried. "Help!"

The window was dashed open, a man leaped through, and before he could command his dazed senses he felt Rutland being snatched from his arms, and received a blow on the head that laid him low.

The whole place was now in a blaze, and no possible means of saving it. How the wood crackled and the flames roared, while burning portions of the roof continued to fall in all directions, setting fire to those parts of the floor not already ignited.

Owen Memphis lay dazed and giddy only for half a minute, but even in that time the fire scorched and choked his lungs.

But in his horror and distress at the loss of Rutland he paid no heed to this. He staggered up and went towards the window just as the face of Boswell appeared there.

"Thank God, lad, out at once! Where's the little un?"

"Stolen," replied Owen, in a gasping voice, as Boswell dragged him out and laid him down on the sward out of danger of the fire.

The whole fearful truth was understood then. The ranche had been set on fire that the boy might be stolen.

"To horse, boys!" cried Boswell. "Scour the whole state but bring that reptile who did this, and the boy he has stolen, back again; never

mind the shanty, we can do nothing for it now, let it rip!"

"My horse, sir. In the name of Heaven give me my horse!" said Owen. Boswell would have remonstrated, but Owen was frenzied.

"I will never lay me down till I have found him," he cried, and mounting his horse, galloped rudely away—whither? anywhere—everywhere—and for what?

Let us change the scene.

SCENE TWO—ON THE MEXICAN PLATEAU.

THE sun was emblazoning the far western sky, as a party of horsemen drew up on a verdant and wooded path.

Most of the men were Indians, with a sprinkling of Creoles of the lowest type—the outlaw and the bandit.

They formed into a horseshoe line, all with their faces turned toward one object, a towering tree whose luxuriant foliage glinted in the sun's glow, and moved and sighed in the light breeze.

There was a strange hush throughout the party, until four persons entered the center of the circle.

Owen Memphis, his hands tied behind him—Rutland, pale and trembling, trying to break away from Digby, who held him firmly, and a swaggering Creole, apparently leader of the gang.

"Captain Digby," said the Creole, in Spanish, "the prisoner is ours, not yours."

Digby bowed coldly, but there was a snakish glitter in his eyes.

"I listen, Senor Hahyan," he said.

"The prisoner was brought into our camp last night by two of our men; there were three; he fought desperately and killed one. It was in self-defense, and I had intended only to detain him for a time. One of the men was Sangrado, who, in your service, carried that younger boy from the fire. The prisoner recognized him, but said nothing; I did not suspect this, and so left him free, and Sangrado was sentry. We lay down to sleep, and when we awoke the prisoner was gone. Sangrado lay weltering in his blood—dead?"

There was an ominous murmur from the men. Rutland with a sob, buried his face in his hands.

"There stands Sangrado's murderer!" and Hahyan pointed to Owen with a deadly and ferocious calm that was far worse than passion.

"We gave chase, and only came up with him half an hour before we overtook you and your escort."

"What have you to say to this, Owen Memphis?" asked Captain Digby.

Owen drew his splendid figure to its full height, and smiled scornfully.

"I believe you understand Hahyan."

"Every word," answered Owen, who had been cultured from the year he could talk, and educated with the view of his standing high among the world's noblemen in the not far distant future.

"What have you to say?"

"What can I say? you mock me, Captain Digby. This is a foul conspiracy to get me out of the way forever. Should I beg my life from such as you, or such scum as these? Never!"

He answered purposely in Spanish that they all might understand him.

"I do not want his blood," continued Hahyan, "if my people will spare him. What say you all?"

"We have but one law, senor, we know him to be guilty. He must die," said the spokesman.

"Death—death! Let him pay the penalty!" cried the rest, as with one voice.

"Prisoner," said Hahyan, "we hang a thief; we will let you choose between hanging and being shot, as you are not a thief."

"Oh, Owen—Owen!" cried out Rutland. Speak, say you are not guilty, prove you are not. Speak!"

"Hush, Daisy, you distress me."

"You can save him," cried Rutland, turning to Captain Digby. "Save him—save him!"

"Senor," cried Owen, stilling his bursting heart, for the voice, the only one he loved on earth, made him cling to life and racked his very soul. "Do with me as you will. Shoot me if you like, but no matter the method, the deed will be the same, an atrocious murder."

"Prepare then; have you anything to say? for when the sun sets you will be shot; pray, if you wish."

"All I have to say I shall say to him, my brother. Rutland, Daisy, 'come, and the boy flew into his arms."

CHAPTER III.

RUTLAND SHOWS THAT HIS COURAGE IS AS GREAT AS HIS LOVE FOR OWEN.

COARSE and unfeeling as the men were, they turned their heads away, and the callous Captain Digby turned his back at the harrowing parting of these two young and loving hearts.

"Don't cry, Daisy," said Owen, stanchly. "Don't unnerve me. Remember who you are. Father is looking down upon us, Daisy—what would he say? 'Face death, my sons, and never let another see that you suffer.' For my sake, Daisy, and God bless you."

"Oh, Owen, if I were only as strong and as noble as you are, but I am not, I never shall be. You are great, and noble, and good, and why—why don't they kill me instead. Oh, if I could only help you."

Then, as if those words had suggested a thought, Rutland became quiet, strangely quiet.

The twilight was deepening around them, the very wind was hushed, but presently a sound broke the stillness; an awful death-knell in the cocking of five deadly muskets, and the slow, steady tramp of feet on the dull sod, as the chosen file stepped forward four paces from the bend of the horse shoe.

"Your time is up," said the cruel voice of Hahyan.

"God bless you, Daisy, we shall meet in Heaven. Go—go and hide away, and close your ears."

"Brother, kiss me."

That was all the beautiful, fragile boy said, as he untwined his arms and walked away with bowed head and clasped hands.

Something in the tone of his voice, in his resigned manner, suggested to Owen the singular fancy that he heard his mother's gentle voice whispering in his ears.

One look he cast up towards Heaven, and then, clearly, without a quiver of emotion, he said:

"Murderers, I am ready!"

Hahyan stepped forward with a white handkerchief in his hands.

"I will blindfold you," he said.

"I—it is needless. Think you, monster, that I could not see through that. No—no, spare yourself the trouble, and me the waste of words."

"I mean it for your good, senor," said Hahyan, softened by admiration for the brave youth.

"Then I thank and forgive you, but I will not have the light of the world shut out from my eyes till the veil of death falls upon them!"

Hahyan drew back and stood between him and the firing party; another dead and awful lull, in which Captain Digby was startled by feeling a soft hand nestle within his own.

"Captain Digby, you can save him; save him, and I'll go with you wherever you will," said the sweet voice of little Rutland.

"Boy, it is more than my life is worth," replied Digby, "to interfere; but leave this dreadful scene."

"You won't?" cried Rutland, snatching his hand away, and, breaking through the grim line of men, for a moment disappeared.

"Ready?" said Hahyan.

"Ready!" answered the five men.

A moment's pause; Hahyan glanced at Owen, he stood proudly erect, looking his executioners full in the face.

Not one jot paler had his face grown, not an eyelid quivered, still scornful in his lofty and undaunted pride; his mien was defiance, as he meant it to be—defiance to the last.

"Present!" slowly the word was uttered; slowly—slowly, the men raised their weapons in a deadly line.

Hahyan waited for them to take aim, and then, while the command to fire lingered on his lips, he noticed a general start all along their line.

"You shall not murder him—my innocent brother!" shrieked the voice of Daisy, as with a bound he threw himself before his brother, and covered Captain Digby with a revolver that was at full cock.

He had abstracted it from one of the men without detection, and put it ready to shoot before he appeared.

"Let that word be given, Captain Digby," he cried, "and I shoot you dead where you stand!"

His body was thrown back, his blue eyes were purple with the fire of determination. The wavy, flossy curls fluttered over his uncovered head, and the pistol covered the shrinking Digby.

The fragile boy's courage was as great as his love.

"Move a hand—let any one approach me before those guns are put down and I'll fire."

What a picture it made now, for even Hahyan

was aghast, and could only sign to his men to pause.

He did not wish to kill the two. Brave boy, he knew he could not hope to save his brother's life for long.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN BOZ MAKES A NOBLE OFFER.

"DON'T shoot, for God's sake!" cried Owen, when he beheld Rutland right in the line of fire. "Spare him, against whom you can bring no false charge!"

Even in this moment's respite, Owen Memphis only thought of Rutland's safety.

"Daisy," he said, with deep emotion, "put down that pistol; you only prolong my agony and delay a murder you cannot prevent."

"Never! and I'll shoot the first one who attempts to come near me," responded Rutland, with the purple fire in his eyes unabated, and his desperate resolve unshaken.

Captain Digby, still pallid and chagrined, tried to laugh at the boy.

"You must thank him," pointing to the creole leader, "for preventing his men shooting both of you this moment."

"Tell those men to untie Owen's hands, or I'll shoot you, Captain Digby," persisted Rutland.

Here was a dilemma for this company of ruthless men. If by an indiscreet act of theirs, Rutland should be goaded on to shoot one of them, nothing could save his life, and though under the belief of lawful retaliation, the leader could look on at the cruel killing of Owen, he did not intend to be a party to wanton murder.

That Rutland would faithfully execute his threat, no one looking at him could doubt.

There was another of those impressive, and to Owen, torturing pauses, during which Captain Digby and Hahyan looked at each other.

With the impression that some one was stealing up behind him, Rutland turned his head in time to find that his suspicion was correct.

Thoroughly enraged now, he leaped around, but Captain Digby was as quick as he, and knocked the pistol from his hand as he fired.

Two or three threw themselves upon him then, and he struggled in vain, his cries and appeals were alike unheeded, and he was forcibly carried away a safe distance from the harrowing scene.

The firing party took their position once more, and had received the command:

"Present!" when the clattering of horses' hoofs startled the leader.

He thought their cattle had stampeded, but was soon undeceived when a voice thundered:

"*Halte La!*" and Captain Boz galloped among them, followed by his band.

He would have called out in Spanish, only he didn't understand the tongue, and so had recourse to his slight knowledge of French.

"What," he cried, too furious to use any other tongue than English, "what does this mean? Why, you murdering set of scorpions, kill Owen Memphis, would you? Oh, boys, just cover these rascals with your rifles, and at the first sign of war, give them h—l!"

Then he rode up to Owen, and cut his bonds, and dismounting, faced Digby.

"So this is your work?" he said. "What d'ye mean?"

Captain Digby, by a haughty and impatient gesture towards the creole, intimated as nearly as words could have:

"Ask him."

Then he would have left the spot had not Owen confronted him.

"You don't move a step, Captain Digby, till Rutland's back here. Don't let him move, Mr. Boswell."

"He'd better not. Where's the little un?" said Captain Boz, with a gleam in his eyes that implied all that words could say.

The creole's swarthy face showed that passion and resentment were rising within him, though he did not understand a word Boswell had said, he understood his dictatorial manner, and chafed under it.

One of his followers, who could speak both tongues, stepped forward and explained, just as Rutland came rushing in among them and threw himself in Owen's arms.

"Explain this, Memphis!" Boswell said to Owen.

Owen briefly told the story as our reader knows it, using the creole's own words, adding how Rutland had saved his life.

"How came you with this tribe, boy?"

"I felt that Captain Digby would get out of Texas by crossing the Rio Grande in order to

avoid you. I fell in with this party—they detained me, and—I escaped.”

“I care not whether you killed the red devil, or whether you didn’t. You say he stole your brother?”

“Yes.”

“Who fired my ranch?”

“The same party.”

“Who set him on?” and Boswell turned furiously upon Captain Digby, who quailed. The very question showed him his peril.

He looked around upon the powerful men—outnumbering his own friends greatly, and could not quell the conviction that if Boswell intended to take revenge for the loss of his ranch, no one here could save him.

He shuddered and turned cold at the horrible thought of being mercilessly strung up to a tree and left for the carrion flies to feed upon.

“I don’t know who you are, Englishman, or why you are here; but I want to know if you’re responsible for the burning of my ranch?”

“I am not; furthermore, I am here on a painful and apparently hazardous mission. If the boy chooses to throw up good expectations for a vagabond life—my mission is ended.”

Boswell smiled grimly at this.

“Ay, and it may have ended in another way, my fine fellow—as it is—well, no matter, I don’t know who’s leader, but if you ain’t, tell him that I want the two horses belonging to these boys, and the arms of Owen Memphis.”

Captain Digby reiterated this in Spanish to the creole, and must have added something else to it, for an order was given, and the two horses a moment later were led in saddled and equipped.

“And now,” said Digby, with a badly-hidden sneer, “may I ask what all this means? you seem to expect no opposition to your wishes.”

“Opposition—no, and by thunder you’d better not try it, and I’ll tell you what it means if ever I catch you prowling after us. I will hang you to the nearest tree—and it means this much more, that I give the whole gang of you five minutes to mount and return, *the way you came.*”

Captain Digby’s face whitened in bitter anger, and he was on the point of making a hot retort, when Boswell interrogated him.

“Say, Englishman,” he scrupulously avoided appearing to know Digby’s name, “ye can say this: There’s forty-five of us, and only twenty of you—but,” and here Boswell drew himself up with the air of a man who was about to do a noble act, “but tell your feller that if he wants fight I’ll take twenty of my boys and meet him in the open. Let’s hear from ye.”

Digby laughed half-mockingly, and turning, leaped into his saddle. This was the signal for the rest to do the same, and forming a line four abreast, filed slowly out.

It was a grand spectacle, for Boswell was in his saddle too, with Owen and Rutland on either side of him, and his followers forming a picturesque group around him. The last fading streak of sunlight fading in the west, and the grey pall of coming night adding a solemnity to the grand isolation of the great plateau.

As the Indians filed away, Captain Digby turned in his saddle, and shaking his fist at Boswell hissed out:

“We shall meet again, and better prepared to hold our own.”

“As soon as you will,” was the grim response, and the party rode on with a clatter, and were soon lost in the gloom.

* * * * *

“Roving Camp,” as Captain Boz had designated his expedition, had come to a halt for the night.

The fires were blazing, light provisions taken from the pack mules, and extensive preparations were being made for supper.

No expedition that ever set out on the speculative and hazardous search for gold was ever so splendidly and perfectly fitted out as this one, set on foot and commanded by Captain Boz.

“Wal, Memphis, and what are ye brooding about?” asked Boswell of Owen, who sat in gloomy reverie with Rutland at his side.

“I don’t know, sir—was I brooding?”

“Looks like it, lad,” said the chief, sitting down near them, and in the light of the fire.

“I suppose I was wondering how this will end—what can I do? He’s not fit for this kind of life.”

“Nonsense, Memphis, why not? It’ll make a man of him, and I was going to say of you, but you’re as good a man as any in the crowd already. He’ll camp with us. There’s plenty to do the work.”

“Sometimes I think I’m wrong to take him

away from those who can give him the luxuries of life, and the advantages of a good education—but,” and Owen added this with the firm intensity of his passionate nature, “he is all that’s left me, of father, mother, home, kindred, and the thought of losing him makes a devil of me!”

“So it would of me, was I in your place; cheer up, Memphis, I like you. I was sufficiently a gentleman once myself to know when I’m in the company of one; come with me—I know you’ll do your share of the work, and we are sure to unearth some of the gold this country abounds in.”

“But all these men found their own outfits. I having nothing but the horse, and a rifle which is yours.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Memphis. I spent four thousand dollars in my crowd; no—no, Owen, no pride with me; you may owe me your life; all I ask in return is, give me your company, and I’ll guarantee with my life, the safety and welfare of our little brother here.”

“You have been my best friend, as yet, Captain Boswell; I accept your offer, and I come of a family who never desert their friends in or out of the hour of need.”

“Spoken like a brick—your hand—halloo! who the devil’s this?”

And well he might ask.

CHAPTER V.

“ROUGH.”

To Owen Memphis, the apparition that had called forth the last recorded remark of Boswell’s, was nothing new or strange—to nine-tenths of our readers a description will be highly interesting.

Behold, then, a tan-skinned youth, whose age is hard to guess at, but certainly not more than eighteen years; whose puffy face is surmounted with long and shaggy coarse hair, whose head is extinguished in a dirty and battered sombrero—whose body is covered only by a thick blue flannel shirt, and nether limbs encased in short leather overalls that reach half way to his armpits, and are strapped tight down over his boots.

There you have the “cow-boy of Texas; and but for those ungainly overalls mentioned he could never ride through the Mesquite (a high bush with three-inch thorns protruding from every branch and sprig), when in chase of stampeding cattle, without his limbs being lacerated to the bone.

A belt buckled tightly around his waist contained his navy revolver and cartridges.

“Rough, as I live!” said Boswell, as the cow-boy dismounted; “and what the devil brings you here?”

“This ’ere, sir,” answered the messenger, known as Rough and Ready, but which was generally shortened into Rough. “It was found under the blackened ruins o’ the ranch by your pard, Boss. He knowed you’d want it, and I kinder felt like bringin’ on’t.”

“That’s all, eh?”

“No; an’ this.”

He handed Boswell a short note written in pencil.

Boswell took it mechanically, but did not open it; his eyes were fixed steadily upon a small packet given him by Rough.

It was a small tin box much scorched and blackened by the fire. Boswell opened it with some difficulty, and a new and softening emotion lent a tenderness to his face as he looked in the tin receptacle, and upon—what? merely a packet of letters. Yet how carefully he closed the lid, and placed the box in an inside pocket of his buckskin hunting coat.

“How long did you start after we left?” he asked Rough and Ready.

“On’y twelve mortchal hours, sir.”

“Good, Rough; I shall not forget you. Now get a brand from the fire that I may see to read this letter.”

“It’s from your pard,” said Rough, hastening to the fire, and bringing back a flaming brand.

Owen had been an interested spectator of this scene. Of Rough he did not give a second thought; but he wondered at so trifling a packet being delivered at the risk of, even to him, worthless life of a cow-boy.

“Memphis,” said Boswell, when he had read the note, “come, I want you to see this.”

“Does it concern me or Daisy?”

“No, boy; it is a secret communication to me, and which concerns me very seriously.”

“I would rather not be in any one’s secrets, sir. I do not care to have any of my own,” replied Owen, with a loftiness that, had it not been

perfectly natural and consistent with him, would have been arrant insolence.

Boswell looked at him steadily. There was something in the grand and gloomy pride of this beardless youth that fascinated the chief of the gold hunters.

“But I want you to see it. Great Jonathan! if it is my wish that you should be in my confidence, have you any cause to complain?”

“As you will, good friend,” replied Owen, passively, and he stepped up to Boswell and read the note over his arm. The contents were a revelation to Owen.

“DEAR BOZ:—I know that the little box is more to you than your ranch. Rough volunteered to deliver it. God grant it reach you, old pardener. Keep your eye open, there’s them about you as won’t give no warning. *Adam Cursewater is on the lookout.* I saw him, and Jake overheard him swear a eternal vendetta agin’ you and your’n, and enny as you sets that big hart o’ your’n on. If as how it’s troo—and we needn’t never take Jake for a liar—all I say is, that the derned fust time I comes acrost Adam and enny on his bloody-minded gang, I’ll put a pot on ’em on my own akount, d—n their souls. Alwis your pard,

“ZAC.

“P. S.—I’m a bilding up the noo ranch on the ole sight as was burnt down—savvy? so as when you comes home—not finding no gold, as you won’t—thar’ll be the same ole korner fur ole Boz and me ter set yer up agin. You know me. That’s all.”

The singular originality of this missive did not even provoke a smile from Owen. He fixed his eyes upon the lines in italics, and re-read them.

“A vendetta?” he said. “I have heard of this sort of thing out here.”

“It is common, Memphis,” replied Boswell, carelessly. “Look at the vendetta carried on by the Taylor and Sutton boys, which was begun by their grandfathers. But I’ll tell you of that another night. Don’t let this trouble you, Owen.”

“It will not,” said Owen; “but it serves to give me a purpose in staying. I can watch over you, knowing you are too reckless to watch over yourself.”

Owen went back to Rutland, and Rough still stood like an uncouth statue, with a flambeau held aloft.

Unlike our hero, instead of taking little or no notice of Owen, he fixed his eyes upon him, and never shifted them since Owen stood by Boswell’s side.

You could read nothing in the rugged, expressionless face, but there was *something* in the varying light of the cow-boy’s eyes, and he seemed to have received a blow when Memphis uttered his last words, and walked away without so much as even deigning to cast one look upon him.

Boswell mechanically turned to follow Owen; Rough let the torch drop swiftly from his hand, and a shower of sparks circled around his feet.

The suddenness of the action brought Boswell to a full stop.

“Halloo! oh, it’s you, Rough; that’s right, throw it away. I guess you’d better go over to the boys and get supper; to-morrow you’ll start back with the answer.”

“Cap’n,” cried Rough, as if in sudden pain, “your pard told me as how he didn’t want no answer.”

“Well, he wants you.”

“No—no, cap’n. Master, lemme stay with yer; don’t turn me back whar they’re all agin me. Lemme go with yer, ye’ll want a kinder servant. I ain’t a goin’s ter arsk ennything for it, on’y lemme be with yer, cap’n, an’ I’ll arn my living. I will—true ter God I will; don’t sen’ me back like a dorg as warn’t never faithful to yer, cap’n. It’s all I arsk.”

Boswell looked at him in dumb surprise, then a smile of mingled contempt and pity played about his lips; contempt for the youth’s abjectness, and pity for the true earnestness of his devotion.

Owen looked on with scoffing contempt only, and that of the deepest dye. Rutland looked up in silence and tearful wonderment.

“Pooh—bosh, Rough, stay if you will; but I fancy you’ll find it harder even than herding,” said Boswell, and with that threw himself down beside Owen.

“Well, Memphis,” he said, gaily, “I reckon we’ll eat and then I’ve something to say.”

They supped right enough, but that something was certainly never said. The meal was scarcely over when the whole camp was startled by a perfect fusilade of musketry.

The hot and blazing embers of the fires were hurled up into their faces and scattered above and around them. Bullets tore up the earth and threw dust into their eyes—all was confusion.

Rutland recoiled and clung to Owen, and the whole camp rose to a man, and flew to their arms.

"Scatter the fires!" yelled Boswell, starting; "mount, Owen, and take that boy under cover or you'll be a mark for the marauders."

"Owen—Owen!" cried Rutland, terrified at this sudden and warlike onslaught.

"Be calm, Daisy. Don't be a coward."

It was a thoughtless word, and Owen regretted it ere it had passed his lips.

"I'm not a coward, Owen," replied Rutland, his beautiful blue eyes flashing reproach. "But to be suddenly attacked by an unseen enemy startled me."

He broke away from Owen and ran to where his pony stood, and vaulted into the saddle just as another volley of bullets came pelting in, sending up more sparks of dust, scattering more embers and ploughing up the soil. This time it was promptly returned by the gold hunters, save Owen.

He had tried to mount before Rutland and almost succeeded, when the second volley came, and a shot struck Daisy's horse.

It reared, plunged and pawed the air, and then with the bound of a deer, fled like the wind right into the line of the enemy.

"Look!" cried Owen. "Stop him. Oh, Heavens, she's run away with him!" and dashing his spurs into his horse's flanks he thundered on in pursuit.

CHAPTER VI.

NIGHT ATTACK ON THE CAMP.

"A PRETTY mess we've made of it, and had to ride off like whipped curs, and all through that infernal Boswell!" exclaimed Captain Digby, when they halted to consult upon future proceedings.

The creole growled and gave vent to his feelings in as fierce and impious an oath as the Spanish tongue can possibly construe.

"Does *senor capitano* blame me?" he growled.

"On my soul I blame nobody. I blame circumstances. Loss of time, or shall I say delay," laughed Digby; "who the devil was to foresee their coming?"

"Senor, the captain, speaks truly—who was to foresee it?"

"Still, if you hadn't lost quite so much time over that boy—"

"Senor," said the creole, with quite a collection of choice Spanish household words interlarding his conversation. "Senor, do you know that Boswell?—you did. Did you notice the outfit of his party?"

"I did."

"It's worth *thousands* of dollars."

Digby looked up, the speaker went on.

"You want the boy, and the other—"

"You wanted," interrupted Captain Digby, with charming coolness.

"Bah, *senor*. I want that outfit."

Digby began to be interested.

"Senor, the captain, may command us. Senor is too rich to want any of the spoils, but he will get the fair boy and the other we will rid him of."

"Me! I—I don't understand. I do not want revenge."

"Well, does *senor*, the captain, agree to command us?"

"Not I. I have commanded a British regiment, but Indian desperadoes—ugh—thanks, no; if you are particularly anxious to go for the spoils at the risk of getting cold lead, I am with you. I should not like to return without that precious cub after having gone so far in the matter."

"Then, *senor*, we will to horse. They'll camp not far from the plateau where we left them; we can surprise them, and then, curse them, they shall see; boastful, bragging Texans; pah!" and the creole in his revengeful hate spat upon the ground as if he were spitting upon the whole race.

"You have a lively sense of humor, my friend," said Digby, with a sneer. "Don't you think that you had better tell your men before they go to sleep, and see how they take it?"

The men were briefly addressed by their leader, and the plan he had already matured expounded.

The greed of these poor and ill-fed prowlers gave them a desperate valor.

In a country where you can hire a ruffian to cut your enemy's throat for a silver dollar, it

can scarcely be wondered at that twenty or so, would, if they got a chance, massacre Captain Boswell and his followers to get possession of an outfit worth thousands of dollars.

Captain Hamilton Digby watched the tribe eagerly seizing their weapons and tumbling into their saddles, hungry to steal, like bloodthirsty savages, upon a sleeping camp, to murder and pillage.

"Mind you," he said, almost savagely, "I take no hand in this; I go, because I want the boy, and if I fight at all, it will be purely in self-defense; but I would not raise a hand to save one of you."

The creole looked at him, and scowled darkly; instinctively his hand sought his long knife, and Digby saw the act.

"What a fool you must be," he said. "Do you suppose I would risk saying what I just said, if I thought you would not understand me. Never do that with me, my friend, as I am quite likely to be a little more ready than you," and he turned away.

"Well, he won't betray us, at least," muttered the creole, mounting his horse, and having found the trail of the gold hunters, they moved silently onward.

When they came in sight of the camp-fires, the gold hunters had just got through with supper, and at this distance seemed to be asleep.

Carefully walking their horses, until the leader thought that they were within easy range, the Indians drew up, and each desperado—as he supposed—covered his man.

Captain Digby, with his quick eye searching the camp for Rutland, sat with folded arms conspicuously to the front, and on a raised mound, nor did he even turn his head when the first volley was fired—many of the bullets whistling close to him.

"You'll have to do better than that, my friend," he called to the creole, "or run for it. Ah! there's Rutland. Don't fire where the boys are."

He beheld the sudden consternation in the camp, and then the fires were kicked out and scattered; darkness rendered it impossible for him to see what damage the Indians had done.

The last thing he saw was Rutland's pony plunging forward, with its head in his direction.

He unfolded his arms then, gathered up his reins, and waited.

He suddenly became aware that his own people were dividing and withdrawing into ambush, just as a terrific volley from the gold hunters swept in among them.

The splendid weapons held by the men of the roving camp were truer and carried further than the antiquated arms of the Indians, and many of the latter bit the dust, for even darkness could not save them.

In an instant, the leader of the Indians recognized his danger in the entire failure of his murderous plan, and calling to his followers and Digby to retreat, he set an example, which at once became a regular stampede.

It was at this moment that Rutland's horse, stung with the bullet, and frenzied with agony, thundered past them, and Digby wheeled around, in the vain hope of checking the infuriated mustang's career.

But it shot past him like a phantom, borne on by the wind.

The boy's fair locks saved him from becoming a target as he shot through the retreating line until he got a little way ahead, and in a line with the creole.

He could not see who it was, and his black blood being up, he followed on with the intention of shooting near enough to make sure of his aim.

Rutland, knowing nothing of the dangers behind him, kept all his faculties alive to those in front of him.

The very rate that his horse was going, created a wind that nearly cut his eyes out, so that he had to lower his head, getting the top to bear the brunt of it, and look out for pitfalls and trees.

Yet he knew he was helpless to steer the maddened brute.

Something suddenly arose, darker than the darkness before him.

It was one of those high plateaus behind which the mountain peaks rise in rugged grandeur.

There was but one narrow, winding path by which it could be ascended on foot, and the pony, as though the devil were in him, made directly for this.

Ay, had even struck the bottom of the path as Rutland perceived his danger, and began scrambling up like a mountain goat.

It was well for Rutland he had been almost bred in the saddle.

It was well for him that he inherited a nerve and courage that nothing but nature could give, and that never could be acquired, or his destiny would have ended here.

Bending low over the saddle, he gave all the assistance he could to the frenzied pony, but he knew it could not go much higher.

The earth and stones were rattling down beneath the beast's iron hoofs.

Its back was almost perpendicular. The fore-legs were bent and strained, with the merest tip of its shoes holding a purchase.

It could not hold on. A few struggles more, a few yards higher, and it must topple over backward, and carry its daring young rider with it.

He looked down in this moment of dire peril, and the blood stilled in his veins.

To fall in any way now would cause him to be mangled to death, and another danger menaced him below.

The creole, with his swarthy face upturned, was taking deliberate and steady aim with his deadly rifle.

CHAPTER VII.

A FRIGHTFUL NIGHT.

AT the very moment the creole had his finger on the trigger, a heavy stone hurled down by the iron shod hoof of Rutland's struggling pony, struck the desperado with such force between the two eyes that it nearly unhorsed him, and rebounding upon the animal's shoulder, caused the sensitive creature to swerve aside, and feeling no check upon the rein, it started off at a rapid gallop after its own party.

Savage as the creole was at this, he owed his life to it, for Boswell's men were skirmishing in all directions, and three or four bullets whistled past him before he recognized the deadly peril he had just escaped.

The blow between the eyes had set his ugly nose bleeding profusely, besides making the water gush from his optics till he could scarcely see, and all the oaths in the Spanish vocabulary did not bring him one atom of relief.

Meantime the moment had come for Rutland to choose his chance of safety, if there was one.

The pony had stumbled and lacerated its knee. This alone prevented it from falling backwards, and Rutland threw himself from the saddle, staggered, swayed, and then went down on all fours and found himself making a rapid and uncomfortable descent.

He could not stop himself, try how he might. The loose stones went down with him, denying him even the slightest chance of a foothold, and there was the dread of the pony coming after him to add an impressionable item to his danger and distress.

If there is any truth in the familiar quotation that "Providence watches over drunken men and children," it was surely exemplified in this case.

Drifting to the extreme edge of the path, he struck a sharp curve where some stubble and stones gave him a foothold and a rest.

Hot and panting, the exhausted boy looked up. The pony had just made its last gallant but ineffectual struggle, had lost its legs, and came toppling down like an avalanche, and sweeping so close to Rutland as almost to touch him, reached the bottom of the path like a thunderbolt.

The horrible peril was over, and the brave boy breathed the word "safe," as he sunk into a recumbent position and rested.

With rest came reflection, and with reflection the awful sense of loneliness, that brought with it new and painful emotions.

Alone at night in the great mountain range, surrounded perhaps by a hundred unseen dangers that might arise at any moment and menace him.

Perhaps deserted. How could he tell—no longer did he hear the welcome sound of clattering hoofs, or the defiant shouts of pursuers and pursued, and but for the noise of insect life, the stillness of a deserted "God's Acre" reigned.

He could no more find his way back to the camp than he could walk upon the waters of the deep.

How his young heart hungered for the companionship of some living thing. He crept slowly and cautiously down the rugged and steep path to where the pony lay.

Tender-hearted always, he was doubly tender-hearted now.

"Is it dead?" he said, inwardly; "poor thing, perhaps it has broken its leg and is in agony."

He knelt by the animal and patted its neck soothingly, for it was snorting in pain, though it lay quite still.

It seemed to understand the meaning of his caressing touch, for it lay quiet after a few min-

utes, and Rutland, drooping his head upon his arm, which rested on the pony's back, fell asleep, and so found temporary surcease from his sorrow.

Poor little fellow! what had he to wake up to? Desolation—hunger—perhaps abandoned.

* * * * *

Daylight saw Roving Camp reorganized, and most of the men who were not away, preparing breakfast.

Boswell, pacing moodily to and fro, listened now and again as if he expected arrivals, and his face brightened when he heard the rapid canter of a couple of horses, and the next moment Owen, in company with a southerner, known as Black Wolf, rode in.

Owen glanced quickly and anxiously around the camp, and his already haggard face became ghastly in his heart agony.

"No news?" he asked.

"None, Memphis," replied Boswell. "Come, lad, you'll play yourself out—stay and take something, or you'll go under."

"Can I have a fresh horse?" was the only response.

"Twenty, if you like, lad."

"Boswell, Rut's horse must have followed Captain Digby's party, and I'll follow them, too; I will, so help me Heaven!"

"What makes you think it was Captain Digby's party?" asked Boswell, as Owen dismounted.

"Who else could it be?"

"The Indians, possibly, under the leadership of that half-caste thief. You don't know the varmints as well as I do, lad; our arms, horses, and general equipment aroused their cupidity. They'd massacre twice our number to possess such spoils."

Still Owen was not convinced.

His wild and passionate love for Rutland was nightmare with him, and now that Captain Digby had made an attempt to abduct him, he would never be able to get rid of the idea that Digby was forever on his track.

"Call Rough to get a fresh horse," said Boswell to one of the men, "while Memphis takes a bite of something."

"Rough rode off an hour ago," replied the man. "Guess he's gone to try and find the trail of the little un."

Owen's lips curled scornfully.

"He—a cowboy!" he said, contemptuously.

"Don't underrate him, lad," Boswell observed, quietly. "He's rough in name and nature, and uncouth, but he's good at his work. I've seen him, without the slightest change on his stupid face, ride at full gallop and shoot prairie hens with his revolver, bringing down one at every shot, and that's no mean feat, either."

"Every animal has its peculiar predominating instincts," was Owen's haughty response.

"Don't make an enemy of him, lad."

"I, Captain Boswell? you need not fear. I shall neither try to make an enemy or a friend of him. He will chose his own companions, a privilege, I suppose, will be accorded me."

"Hullo, here comes Little Peter," said Boswell, as if glad to change the subject.

There is a strange sense of grim humor among these border men as there is with the California miners, and it shone out strikingly in this instance.

Anything more absurd than in calling the fresh arrival "Little Peter," could not easily be imagined.

He was within an inch of seven feet high in his stockings, if he wore any; straight as an arrow, meager in limb and body, but one mass of well-knit iron muscle and sinew; a straggly chin beard of a dark hay color; had twinkling eyes and a capacious mouth, about which lurked a world of unexpressed fancies.

"Seen anything?" queried Boswell. "Eh, Pete?"

"I seen an Injun, stiff," was the brief reply.

"D—n the Indian!" Boswell let out.

"I reckon," and Little Peter dismounted from his tall and massive Kentucky thoroughbred, and sniffed the air as if he smelled something good to eat.

Brevity of speech, or a great poverty of language, was Little Peter's great characteristic; next to that came his enormous appetite.

"Did you strike a trail, Pete?"

"I reckon, scores."

"Owen," said Boswell, in sheer despair, "I will go with you, and I'll send parties of men in all directions to scour the infernal plateau for a radius of ten miles around the camp; if that fails, why, then, by thunder, we'll strike the trail of those red-skinned horse thieves, and follow 'em up with our whole force!"

"Thank you, Captain Boswell," said Owen, taking his hand.

"I guess, Memphis, we'll ride up the mountain yonder," Boswell said, when they started, after setting the other parties out, while Little Peter, with an independence peculiarly his own, set off alone.

They—Owen and Boswell—rode rapidly along, keeping a good lookout, and seeking a winding path, ascended the summit of the very plateau that had frowned down upon Rutland and his maddened pony.

They looked down from where they stood into the valley beyond, and a sight met their gaze that wrung an awful cry from Owen.

Standing pallid, but firm, was brave little Rutland, holding his pistol in his hand, his gaze fascinated by the flashing eyes of a fierce jaguar, with nothing between it and him but the wounded pony, trying to struggle up in its palsied terror.

"You dare not shoot from here," said Boswell. "We might miss that brute and hit the boy. We must gallop down the way we came, and get around. Look!"

He laid his hand heavily on Owen's shoulder, and pointed, with a smile of intense satisfaction, to a horseman thundering on towards Rutland.

"It's Rough," he said.

"While we dally here, my brother may be mangled in the teeth of that beast. My God, can we not gallop over the edge of this plateau, and fire down upon it?"

There was no time to lose; the fierce animal was lashing its flanks with its tail, and wriggled its powerful body preparatory to taking a deadly leap.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH RUTLAND FINDS HIMSELF FACE TO FACE WITH A JAGUAR—ALSO IS SHOWN THE ROUGH STUFF ROUGH IS MADE OF.

THE horseman they had seen was the much-despised "cowboy," Rough—the first to find the lost boy, and in what a fearful peril.

Generally called stupid and wooden-headed, because nature had not given him the most intelligent of faces, and because he was generally a passive creature in the hands of others, no one ever expected the cowboy to set out with any distinct and settled purpose beyond riding down a stampeding cow, or riding back for dinner.

Yet this boy in his dull way out-generalled the whole forty odd of thinking and intelligent men.

The moment daylight set in, Rough, having taken a very "wooden" view of the hurry and scurry that characterized the night's proceedings and excitement, shambled off to the spot where Rutland's pony had been tethered.

A few rings stamped in the soil, a drop of blood fallen from the wounded horse, commenced the trail.

Rough followed it up for some distance, sorted it out from the rest, and then stood up and looked straight ahead.

No lighting up of the wooden face, no sparkle in the dull eyes gave the slightest token of the bright reasoning of this ungifted being.

Put into words—which he never could have done—it meant this:

"Mad horses run on a straight line; a straight line from here means the great plateau yonder. That's the trail, if 'tis to be found at all."

Whereupon Rough shambled back to camp, slung his rifle across his back, leaped into his saddle, and without a word to anyone, cantered off, his dull eyes, as round as saucers, keenly on the lookout for the object of his search.

Thus it was, in spite of Boswell and Owen taking a much shorter route, Rough was first to catch sight of Rutland.

For a moment he could not believe his own eyes, and so reined in.

Then there was no doubting their accuracy.

There was Rutland, with nothing between him and the fierce jaguar, but the dead or dying horse; nothing to save his life from the savage beast but a wretchedly incompetent little pistol, and yet he stood, just as others had seen him stand when he stood between Owen and the rifle barrels of the shooting party about to execute him.

The jaguar, with its jaws open, and tongue protruding, glowered upon the daring boy as if he had been an intruder on the surface of the earth.

As the beast began to creep along the ground, Rutland retreated a step or two and fired.

He might just as well have thrown a pebble.

With a quivering snarl, the jaguar leaped into the air, and alighted upon the horse, burying its monstrous claws into the suffering creature's

back, and its long, glistening fangs into the tender flesh.

Scarcely aware of his own actions, Rutland continued to empty his revolver into the monster, and one shot struck it in the mouth.

That bullet made itself felt, and, perhaps, for the first time it recognized an enemy in the elegant stripling before it.

It lifted its head from the reeking carcass of the dead horse, and with one of its most enraged snarls, arose on its haunches to take its deadly leap.

Rutland ran now; he had no more shots left, his foot kicked against a stone, and he stumbled.

"Owen!" he cried, as he fell and closed his eyes.

A shot answered him; not the little, spitting pops of his weapon, but the clear, loud and echoing ring of a Winchester rifle, and something fell with a heavy thud within three feet of him.

He scrambled to his feet and looked around him. The jaguar was writhing, mortally wounded, and the welcome face of Rough, still solid and wooden, however, loomed up a hundred paces away.

The cow-boy galloped up, dismounted, and drawing his revolver, placed it almost to the jaguar's ear, and sent a ball crashing through its brain.

And now the horror of the desolate night, and the excitement of the morning told upon Rutland.

He staggered as if he were drunk.

Rough knelt on one knee, took the boy in his arms, resting him upon the other knee, and made him swallow a draught of whiskey from his flask.

The effect was instantaneous. The boy coughed—nearly choked—sneezed until his eyes watered, and then looked up with a faint smile.

"Don't give me any more of that nasty stuff," he said, and Rough's saucers began to expand as if he could not believe his own sense of hearing. "Nasty stuff!" what was the world coming to? However, he said nothing, only took a long pull himself, and found his tongue.

"Guess I needn't ask if ye ken ride—just kase I knows it—mebbe ye ken sit in the saddle?"

"No, thank you, Rough. Say, you're an awful good shot; Owen will be grateful to you for being so brave."

Will Owen? We shall see.

Rough assisted Rutland into the saddle, and mounting behind him, cantered toward the camp, but had not proceeded far before he met Boswell and Owen.

Rough came to a stand.

"Ah, Owen!" cried Rutland, his lips quivering with joy, "Rough saved my life: indeed he did."

"Well, so would any one else in his place. I dare say I shall be able to make it up to him some day. Get down, Daisy, and let Rough have his horse to himself."

Never once did he look at Rough—never a word of thanks—not one jot did he descend from the lofty pedestal created for himself by his own gloomy and austere pride.

His very words now were commands, and his tone only softened when he uttered the name of his jealous love—"Daisy."

If you strike stone sufficiently hard, you will deface it; no wonder then that wood succumbed.

The blow was unseen, but it struck home. The wooden face showed an impression for once in its life, and Boswell, watching Rough, saw it.

"You're a good fellow, Rough," he said, riding close and patting his faithful follower on the shoulder; "and I'm d—— glad I brought you with me. Let's get back."

"Tain't worth a-noticin' on, mister," was Rough's only response, and they rode back to camp, Owen clasping Rutland to him in an impressive silence.

All the party did not come in till midday, and those who came the latest cursed the loudest for having been fools enough to go "stampeding around" after "Captain Boz's Doll," and thus in the inspiration of angry disappointment, Rutland was christened a name that clung to him as long as the camp held together.

The results of the previous night's skirmishing were duly reported.

Five Indians were left dead on the field, and four ponies captured, one of them being an extremely pretty mustang with a perfectly white body like a goat, and fawn-colored legs and tail.

It was named Snowflake by the same process as Rutland had been, and duly presented to "Cap'n Boz's baby" with the gratuitous remark, that the donors:

"Hoped as how it wouldn't go skedaddling

away kase of a darned lump o' lead in its hide, that ennybody could swallow afore supper."

Roving Camp was getting into motion once more, when Little Peter strode up to Boswell, and pointing to some wooded hights a quarter of a mile distant, said:

"Boss, look thar; Injins, by Jimminy!"

CHAPTER IX.

GOLD.

CAPTAIN BOZ at once sent out scouts to reconnoiter, and moved slowly on, taking care that the pack-mules should be well and properly guarded.

Every man was on the alert, and Owen, still feeling hotly embittered against their unknown enemy, rode with his rifle across the pommel of his saddle, only too anxious to get a shot at those whom he thought had been the cause of imperiling the life of Rutland.

The day passed off without event.

The Indian scouts, if belonging to the enemy, were more than satisfied with the formidable array they had seen, and with Indian cunning they took to their heels and the woods to await reinforcements and a more favorable opportunity.

Roving Camp kept up a five days' forced marching, then a report spread that sent a feverish thrill through the camp.

A skirmishing party that had gone on ahead on the look out for game, and of which Owen made one, returned and reported having discovered a rapid and clear stream, gushing through a rocky channel.

"It is evidently the result of volcanic forces," explained Owen, who was well informed on the nature of mineral productions, "and in all probability gold could be found at the bottom. It is a good spot for a camp, and the steppes lying beyond give an ample field for game."

A new light shone in Boswell's eyes, and his cheeks flushed.

"Gold!" he said, as if the very sound of the word were elysium. "Gold—so soon. Who discovered it?"

"Two or three of us discovered the stream. Its hidden mineral resources I alone suspected."

"That's good for you, Owen; we'll have all things on a square deal, and you shall not be done out of a discoverer's dues."

"I can scarcely claim that honor," objected Owen.

"You don't claim it; but enough, let us ride on."

The fever spread; even Rutland caught the infection, and new life was infused into the camp, and the march was continued amidst great hilarity.

The stream was soon reached, and then a good deal of the ardor cooled down.

"Don't see nawthin' in that air stream different to no other," commenced Little Peter, in his particularly negative way.

"Guess it's only good to drink," snarled "The Wolf," a Virginian, George Hepler by name. "Whar's the gold? I swear I don't make out whar it can be."

"Memphis had it in his eye," said another, and so they went on walking to the stream in twos, and threes, peering into its rippling depths long and anxiously, and then returning with a look of extreme disgust on their grim faces.

Presently there was a revulsion of feeling.

A quiet and unobtrusive, sparsely built man, known as the "Mountain Squirrel," took his peep in.

"Don't be so mighty all-darned certain," he said. "Say, boys—fancy I see something there."

That was all that was necessary.

Half a dozen others immediately swore that they had caught sight of pieces of gold sticking up like yellow stones, and each gave his individual description of the particular piece he saw, and was ready to swear himself black in the face to substantiate it.

Taking the aggregate of these reports the camp learned that a piece of gold as big as your thumb was seen, another larger than an egg, and a third, "that yer couldn't no how put inter yer hat," and so forth, and discussion waxed dangerously warm when Captain Boz put a stop to it.

"There's no use in fighting, boys," he said. "Take off your boots, and go in with bare legs, and see what sort of Tom Tiddler's ground it is. But let's get the camp in order first."

This was unanimously assented to, and just as willingly as they would have entered into a free fight.

Very little was done the first day, but with

the dawn of the second, the men arose in a lively state of industry, and work began.

Knee-deep in water, with their arms plunged in up to their shoulders, they groped about, bringing to the surface whatever was loose and yielding, but with no very great results.

The matter thus brought up was carefully broken and examined, and Boswell found just sufficient of the precious metal to encourage him to prosecute the search.

"We must get lower down," he said, to Owen. "Get right to the bottom, if we can."

"Why, certainly."

"How?"

"We must go higher up and dam the stream, then cut a channel connecting with the outlet. We shall have a dry bottom then to work on."

"Halloo! an engineer, eh?"

"I think not," laughed Owen. "The work is simple enough, and the labor nothing, if a sufficient number go to work at it with a will."

"Good man! do as you say, Memphis. I agree it is our only plan."

So a dozen men went to work, cutting the new channel, and twice that number began building the dam.

Still, there were a few who would persist in groping fruitlessly among the loose stones and rock for the gold that only existed in their fevered imaginations.

The camp was in a state of wild excitement, and Rutland, whose immature mind associated the most romantic emotions with gold-mining, sat or stood by the brink of the stream, watching the men in their eager efforts, raking up the bottom of the creek with their powerful fingers.

One of these men, known as the Arkansas Butcher, was nearly mad.

He delved and dug, and dived and clawed with a perfect frenzy of energy, and every handful of muck he threw on the bank, close, by-the-way, to where Rutland was standing, he watched with a wolfish gleam in his eyes, and kept a suspicious lookout on the beautiful boy, as if he had stationed himself there with the especial intention of picking up anything that Butcher might accidentally discard.

Presently Butcher took a spade, and began throwing up the reeking earth in heaps.

Rutland still watching it, saw a piece of the soft, rocky substance protruding from the pulp, and it was speckled with glittering little spots about the size of pin points.

He picked it up.

It was spangled all over.

With a cry of delight, he turned to run up to Owen, calling at the same time:

"Owen—Owen, look here!"

An awful oath burst from the Butcher's pallid lips, as he leaped to the bank, and catching Rutland by the arm, threw him down.

"Give me that, you white-faced little chief!" cried the brute, squeezing his powerful fingers on the boy's white and tender throat. "God, I'll have your liver, you—"

What a cry Owen gave as he rushed to the spot, and dealt the butcher a blow under the ear that took his feet from under him.

Owen knew his peril, for the Butcher was the most murderous man in the camp, and therefore drew his revolver, and was ready when the Butcher jumped to his feet.

"Quit that, you!" yelled Boswell, coming up.

"I'll have his blood—I'll have his blood!" was all that Butcher could utter.

"Yes, in the dark," sneered Owen. "I won't shoot you like the dog that you are. I'll give you a gentleman's chance of death; follow me a quarter of a mile and we'll see who remains here. There is no room in the camp for both; no man abuses and strikes him without answering for it to me."

There was no help for it; bad blood once up between them out here, meant immediate settlement or future assassination.

Boswell was pained and troubled; all he could say was:

"I'll see fair, and mark ye, I'll scatter the brains of the one who pulls unfair, or fires before I give the word."

Labor ceased as if by magic; a duel, fair and upright, was a novel way of settlement.

It pleased the humor of the men, and they tramped out in a body to see it.

Distance was measured, principals were stationed, conditions decided, and then above the sudden stillness rang out the voice of Boswell:

"Ready?"

"Quite," came calmly from Owen Memphis, as he slowly took aim and waited for the word to fire.

CHAPTER X.

END OF THE DUEL—OWEN LEADS A BUFFALO HUNT AND BECOMES THE HERO OF THE PARTY.

FOR an instant Captain Boswell paused before the fatal word was given.

If he had hoped that the deadly encounter might have been averted, one glance at the passion distorted face of the Kansas Butcher showed him the folly of such a hope.

"One!" he called, loudly and distinctly.

He was to call "three," and at the word "three" both combatants were to fire.

"Two!"

It was seen now that the Butcher was unsteady. It was a severe tax upon his nerves. He had been accustomed to use his pistol or knife without warning.

Owen, on the contrary, was cool and unmoved, and the glitter of his grandly gloomy eyes held his antagonist in a spell.

"Three!"

Twin reports rang out—Owen's left arm was seen to twitch as if it had received a sudden jerk.

But he stood erect.

The Butcher remained stark still, but with an awful look of dying agony on his face.

A crimson stream spouted from the very center of his throat, and at the same moment Boswell ran towards him, he fell on his face, dead.

A murmur of admiration burst from the whole camp.

The Butcher was not popular, and those who had affected to be his most friendly companions feared him.

"You are hit, Memphis," said Boswell, going up to our hero.

"Only slightly, sir," answered Owen, whose left arm was badly ripped up by his antagonist's bullet. "I am sorry for this, Captain Boswell, but no one shall strike Rutland or abuse him without answering to me for it."

"Not much fear on't," remarked Little Peter, dryly; "ye're a derned sight too smart a shot, I reckon."

Owen did not reply; his passion had left him now. He cast a look of pity at the dead man, and moved slowly back to the camp.

The dead was dispossessed of arms and outer garments, and buried with more expedition than ceremony.

One or two said "poor devil," the humorists jested, the taciturn returned to their labors with only mind for the one absorbing subject:

"Gold!"

The prospect brightened each day, and Boswell saw the necessity of organization.

"The camp must be provisioned," he said, one night when his followers, in obedience to a summons from him, had congregated around Boswell's tent. "All of us can't stay at the creek, and those who are away for the benefit of the community ought to have their share of the gains."

This met with general approval, though many "motions" and "amendments" were offered and discussed before a complete code was unanimously adopted.

None in camp showed such a reckless temper as Owen, though he worked as hard as any. Boswell saw it and took him aside when the meeting had dispersed.

"Memphis," he said, in his usual fatherly way, "I think it would suit you better to go in charge of the hunting party. I don't force it upon you. I'll be answerable with my life for little Rutland, as the chance of your being absent for a week or so would be a greater amount of fatigue than he is equal to."

"I am willing, Captain Boz, I should like it," answered Owen.

"There are two things you must be careful not to allow; any interference with the little bands of Comanche Indians you are likely to meet, and quarrelling or dissension among your men."

"Will they accept me as their leader?"

"Yes; but to keep your prestige you must not fail to be their equal in the chase. I have every confidence in you."

Boswell might have added that Owen had every confidence in himself.

The next day the party were ready to start. Boswell proposed that Rough should be one; Owen consented almost eagerly.

Boswell opened his eyes, but said nothing, though he never guessed the explanation, simple as it is.

Daisy's affectionate and confiding nature, and his utter indifference to distinction of class, had won the heart of Rough, who, in a score of ways, without ever attempting too much familiarity, had shown a clumsy, but gentle fondness for the beautiful boy who was the pet of the camp.

This aroused Owen's jealousy at once, though he concealed it, that he might not wound Rutland's feelings.

The hunting party rode off in high spirits, and Owen, knowing that Boswell would keep his promise concerning Daisy, was in as good spirits as the rest.

As soon as they reached the plains, each seemed to vie with the other in feats of horsemanship and skill with the rifle.

Rough, as if determined to gain the good opinion of Owen, performed the not uncommon feat among the Texas cowboys of riding over the long grass at full gallop, revolver in hand, and brought down a cackling prairie chicken at every successive shot, until the six chambers were empty.

After being three days out they began to be pretty successful.

A herd of buffalo was sighted, and a magnificent chase began.

The most expert hunters prepared their lassos, and now Owen saw that they looked upon him with superiority, and even went so far as to chaff him.

He had not learned to use a lasso.

Without losing his temper, he rode at the head of the party, as graceful and perfect a horseman as the oldest of them had ever seen.

The moment he was within range he let the reins drop to the joint of his left arm, got a firm purchase with his knees, raising himself in the stirrups, and taking aim, fired.

The bullet entering behind the shoulder of the nearest beast brought it down with a crash.

The smile of superiority died away on the faces of his companions—had he failed they would have hooted, though each knew that it frequently requires a half a score of bullets to put a bison *hors de combat* unless vitally stricken.

He rode up to his prize, and dismounting, completed the work with his knife.

Rough joined him to help in disemboweling the animal, while the rest of the party, chagrined at his carrying off first prize, rode on into the herd.

Two were successfully lassoed, against which the hunters scored three mishaps.

One man was dangerously injured, his horse being tripped up and he falling under it—a second, thrown heavily, was trampled upon by the stampeding animals in the rear, and a third pulled out of his saddle and dragged some two hundred yards.

Owen had triumphed. He performed a brilliant act of success. The rest had tried to outdo him and failed. The sense of victory softened him, and he was the first to ride up to the man who lay crushed beneath his fallen horse.

No longer austere, he was all gentleness.

"Poor fellow," he said, "you had a sad fall. Take a little stimulant, it will enable you to bear the pain of being moved."

"It can't be worse than it is," said the man, grinding his teeth lest he should groan aloud. "My inside is crushed, and the brutes they've done for me at last."

That was true.

He sank very fast. By the time that the horse had been rolled over off him, and his head rested, cold and heavy, on Owen's knees, he was barely conscious.

Once he had opened his eyes very wide, and after smiling up into Owen's face, looked at his rougher companions.

"Boys," he said, feebly, "he's true grit—there ain't no shame in any man a following his lead. Guess I've got to hand in my checks—so—good-by, boys."

His face was now distorted in excruciating agony; it suddenly became peaceful, and Owen softly laid down the heavy head which was dead to the sense of touch.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORM—SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF THE PRAIRIE PHANTOM—DANGER AT THE CAMP—A STOCKADE—"62."

THEIR journey back to the camp was enlivened by more than one incident worthy of particular mention.

They had suddenly come upon a magnificent buck drinking at a stream, and such a sight is irresistible to the hunter.

Three of the men, whose horses were less laden than the rest, made a dash for the prize, and the beautiful creature, throwing its nose in the air, went off like the wind.

Still it was within rifle range at the start, and the three fired at once, and—all missed.

Owen could not help a contemptuous smile wreathing his lips as he put spurs to his horse and gave chase.

He forgot, in the excitement of the moment, that no horse would run down a deer, and this one making for a thicket would have soon left him hopelessly behind, had not something in the thicket ahead startled the deer, and it swung around with the intention of putting the "double" on our hero, by making a sweeping circle past him.

Quick as thought, Owen swerved around too, and at the moment when the animal was parallel with him, fired.

It bounded high in the air and fell writhing in its death blood. This second triumph was such indisputable proof that his former feat was not mere

chance, that his party met him looking considerably crest-fallen.

"I wonder what made the brute turn?" said Owen, wondering why his companions had unloaded their saddles and ridden forward to meet him.

"Didn't you see?"

"No!" as though the question was a superfluous one.

"Indians!" laconically exclaimed the rest, save one.

"They disappeared mighty quick when they saw us!" added the one who had not spoken, "and they mean mischief."

"Then we'll get back to camp," said Owen, a sense of coming evil upon him.

Indications of a storm had set in, and it was well-nigh dark before night.

What was most to be dreaded from this was losing the trail.

To steer by the little pocket compass Owen carried, without a light, was a simple impossibility, and no light could be got in a storm.

"We must march hard," Owen said. "This is no place for us to bivouac; besides, we have been away long enough."

"Too long," growled the grumbler of the party.

"D—the bivouac!" supplemented another.

Owen rode up to the side of an old hunter, Josh Murray, who generally rode ahead of the party, seldom caring for conversation.

"What do you think of the night, Murray?"

"Think on't, sir? Harkee yonder. D'ye hear the wind a rippling through them trees?"

"It is like the distant wash of the sea on a sandy shore," answered Owen.

"Mebbe," grunted old Josh. "But I don't know much about them things—ah! here it comes—whoop!"

It came—the wild rush of the storm from its savage lair, the first warning shriek of a cyclone.

The rain fell in a deluge; the blast, a whirlwind, carried fallen twigs and foliage in its path, hurling them into the faces of the foraging party, and subduing the horses with a terror that left them powerless.

The first shock over, the men had donned their cloaks and pulled their sombreros over their brows, and pushed steadily forward.

"Hist!" said Josh, suddenly laying his hand upon Owen's arm.

The action gave the correct meaning to the exclamation—halt.

Owen drew rein, and looked at old Josh.

Old Josh, with his face raised to the pitiless storm, was peering through the gloom.

"Look!"

And Josh's right hand closed with a spank, and his left pointed ahead.

Vaguely outlined in the driving mist, was a shadowy, specter-looking, gaunt figure on a horse, as shadowy in the distance as itself.

Both were perfectly motionless.

"Who is it?" asked Owen.

"Who?" repeated Josh. "The prairie phantom."

"Nonsense," began Owen, when old Josh interrupted him, vehemently:

"Don't nonsense me, young feller. I seen it afore, many a time, an' it allers means mischief. Nonsense; why there ain't a Injun, or a tribe on 'em, this nor t'other side o' the Rio Grande thet don't scare ter a man when it's reported he's been seen. I've tried ter track him, pooh! track the wind more like—tho' he pooty general leaves an awful trail."

"How?"

"He in general passes through Indian quarters, an' you finds as you goes, a few redskins here and there dead as nails, and with a number slashed on their breast. The last one I comed across was stamped '61.' Don't you go ter say nonsense ter me. I seen it, I know it; but dern me, I'll try him this time."

So speaking, old Josh fired at the dimly outlined figure in the gloom, just as another deluge came upon them.

They ducked their heads to avoid the heavy shower driven into their eyes with blinding force. When they looked up again the prairie phantom was gone.

Every man in the party had seen it, and like most men reared in ignorance and superstition, they were awed in spite of themselves.

Owen was silent. This phenomenon was something to puzzle him, but not to terrify.

"I'll try my hand the next time," he said, and rode on.

"Ill luck allers come with that devil," growled Josh, as they neared the storm-rent woods. "I guess the darned trail's lost."

But they went on.

The storm increased in fury, slender trees were torn up and carried along with the wind, while the largest ones were thrown down with a crashing, splitting and snapping that baffles description.

Some of the men, recovering from their momentary fear, cursed the elements long and loudly, when suddenly their blasphemy froze on their lips.

"Curse not the storm," cried a voice of peculiar impressiveness. "It saves you from massacre."

There was a sudden and general halt. Eleven hardy men checked by a voice. Eleven pausing before one.

That one mounted on a tall horse black as night. That one, with figure so gaunt, with shoulders so high as to be almost "humpy," as to throw the head well forward like a man who is bent with age.

"The prairie phantom!" gasped Josh, as this dreaded being came out of a cluster of darkened trees and stood right in their path.

This revelation chilled every one except Owen, into silence.

He rode close up to the phantom, so close that the thick fall of rain could not quite cover the strange being's features, and spoke:

"Who are you," Owen asked, "to be wandering here alone?"

"What matter who I am, or why here? Call me, if you will, Castro, or call me nothing," answered the phantom, with a voice so mournful and humble, that Owen was abashed at the haughty and domineering tone he had used.

"It's the phantom," muttered Josh. "But I s'pose Ole Nick can call himself what he likes."

"I heard your men cursing the elements," continued Castro; "the very accident of nature that has saved you; your camp is surrounded by Indian thieves; your companions have had to entrench themselves from the blood-thirsty devils, and but for the rain softening the ground and deadening the sound of your horses' hoofs, you would never regain your camp."

"But we have already lost the trail," said Owen, to whom this awful intelligence had revealed a thousand horrible dangers that surrounded his brother.

"Follow me—I will guide you," with that, Castro wheeled around and led the way.

They moved like shadows through the mist and rain until the rush of water mingled its monotonous gurgle with the howling wind and hissing rain, and they knew then they had struck the creek which wound its way through Roving Camp.

"But for the elements you cursed," said the mystic being—now speaking sternly, "Indian pickets would have been ambushed here. Dismount and lead your horses. You know the way now. We may meet again."

An imperceptible touch of the heel, the black horse bounded forward, and the storm specter was gone again.

Owen dismounted. The others did the same, and revolver in hand they groped their way into the camp.

Something struck Josh's feet. He stopped with an oath, stooped and felt about with his hands.

Then another oath and a start of horror.

"I'll have a light!" he cried. "Thunder and blazes I will see it."

So he protected a match with his big hat and struck a light, Owen and the others gathering around him.

The momentary gleam showed dimly the body of an Indian. The breast bare and blood stained, awful gaping gashes forming figures—deep as the bone would let them be.

The figures, "62."

CHAPTER XII.

SURROUNDED BY DEADLY FOES.

PING—ping! whistling of bullets.

Patter—patter, falling among them.

"D—the light!" exclamation of Josh.

Well he might consign it to, anywhere. It had shown the enemy where they were, and the enemy had taken advantage of it.

In an instant there was confusion, some return shots from the camp, and Boswell's cheery voice calling:

"Hurrah—Memphis is back! This way, boys."

So they were greeted back again.

"We had given you up," said Boswell. "The red devils have smelt out our camp; plunder is their game, I guess; but we were lucky to smell 'em out, and we've given 'em the worst of it."

"Where's Daisy?"

"Safe, but all of a scare about you."

"Thank Heaven that is all."

It was almost pitch dark, not a fire was alight.

The camp was terribly changed; a rough log hut, rudely built was the only strong hold and stockade.

Work had been abandoned, in fact everything showed a state of siege.

We pass over the meeting between the brothers and their mutual explanation; the storm that made the terrors of the night tenfold; the worn out gold hunters on the alert, doing sentry duty—unable to get any cooked food—and scores of other miseries.

But we must mention that Boswell was a good deal affected when Owen mentioned Castro.

"He has been here, lad. It was that strange being who rode in at dusk the night after your departure. He begged for some ammunition—I gave it to him—I asked him to stay, and offered food; he refused to eat, took me aside, told me we were being watched by Indians who were only waiting reinforcements to make short work of us, and—well, I only left him to put the camp on the *qui vive*, as the French say, and, as you guess, he'd gone."

"Strange critter, I reckon," put in Little Peter, who was present. "And—" his jaw dropped as if he had seen "Old Harry."

"Captain Boswell."

There was no mistaking that voice.

It was Castro.

"A word with you."

Boswell went outside the stockade.

"The bloodthirsty demons are preparing to make a descent at daylight. Be prepared. Keep under cover. Entrench your men. The warning is sufficient, why need I say more?"

"But you—"

"Think nothing of me. I would leave my horse with yours till morning. Let me come and go as I please, on my mission of death."

* * * * *

The morning was dawning when the storm abated a little, the rain falling in fitful showers at intervals, and the howling blast subsiding into uncertain but heavy gusts.

Roving Camp was on the alert and even eager to get at the enemy, who as yet had not shown themselves, though they had much the best of the posi-

tion, being located on the heights, while Boswell's party was in an exposed position in the plain below.

"If I only knew just where they are," he said to Owen, "I would give them a salute."

"But I wonder you kept a position that is so fraught with danger."

"I should not have, only you were absent, and the danger you would have incurred deterred me from shifting."

"We must make the best of it," answered Owen.

"We must, but—who is this—Castro?"

"Yes."

Castro, the mysterious, stalked silently up to where Boswell stood.

He looked very wild and haggard, and now, for the first time, Owen could see a little what he was like.

His figure we have already described. His face was equally curious.

Not a vestige of hair was upon it; in fact, not even the sign of any.

His cheeks and forehead were deeply furrowed—of a tan color—with small and piercing black eyes, and eyebrows so long that they curled at the ends like a small mustache.

The color of his hair it was impossible to see, for he wore a singular head-dress of tiger-skin; the upper part of the head of the animal reached from the base of the skull to low down over the forehead, where the tiger's nose rested, while the artificial glass eyes gave a terrible reality to the whole.

His ears and neck were hidden by the skin, which then dropped upon his shoulders in picturesque negligence.

Still he looked strangely weird and unreal.

"You have a terrible enemy," he said to Boswell.

"Where?"

"The leader of the Indians in the mountains."

"The leader—a creole?"

"No."

"An Englishman?"

"No, one Adam Cursewater."

Boswell started, and then laughed loudly.

"The man who swore a *vendetta* against me and mine," he said. "So be it."

"You will not stay here?"

"What should I gain by moving. Could I move without being seen?"

"Ay! I have cleared the way. To horse at once. Follow me up the mountain. The Indians will storm the camp in an hour. When they find it deserted they will remain to search for the plunder. It is your own fault if you do not swoop down upon them, and—"

He paused for an instant, and a fearful gleam shone in his eyes. Then he added with great vehemence:

"Annihilate them! No mercy—no mercy!"

"I will trust you, friend," said Boswell.

"Good; but have you one of your repeating rifles to spare? Give me one."

"A dozen, if you wish."

"Would to God I had hands enough to use them!" was the startling and fervent rejoinder.

Owen stood a silent observer. What terrible mystery clouded this man's life? he wondered; but this was no time for idle thought.

Boswell had already ordered the whole party into the saddle.

Silently they obeyed, and were soon in marching order.

Castro, on his shining black steed, led the way.

"We must go at two abreast," he said, and the whole camp passed out at a walk under the shelter of a frowning mountain's ledge that concealed them from the watchful eyes of the enemy above.

Owen rode by the side of Daisy near the rear end of the line.

A hissing rush of something through the mist—a sudden rattle of musketry, and all the silent order of the gloomy procession was broken.

Some of the horses, startled, or hit by some splinters of rock cut up by the bullets, became almost unmanageable.

The gold hunters wheeled around.

Owen, in fearful dread for Daisy, cried out:

"Spur—spur, Daisy—follow me!" and dashed away at a fearful pace.

It was only in time, for a volley came rattling down from the heights above, and tore up the ground where Owen and his brother had only a minute before stood.

They made a wild gallop for a mountain pass, but were destined never to reach it, for at this moment five or six swarthy Indians stood in their path, and while two dashed up and snatched Daisy's horse by the bridle, the rest covered Owen with their muskets.

Daisy's peril blinded him to his own danger though he could see that he was singled out for death.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE MOUNTAIN PASS—MENACED ON ALL SIDES—THE PRAIRIE PHANTOM'S DEMONIAIC RIDE—OWEN A PRISONER.

We have already shown that Owen never stayed to think or weigh the chances for or against him.

If he was headlong, he was at least intrepid.

Utterly disregarding the menacing muzzles of the deadly arms aimed at him, he hurled himself upon the two exultant savages, who had checked and now retained Daisy's horse.

"Shoot—shoot!" cried one of the dusky devils.

"Ay, shoot!" echoed Owen, as he fired his revolver at the nearest Indian—"shoot as I do."

The Indian fell dead as spoke.

Rutland turned upon his other captive, who, fearing Owen's deadly six-shooter, joined his companions, while Owen, with the devotion that had characterized him all along, put himself in front of his younger brother, and discarded his revolver for his rifle.

He would have been riddled like a strainer, had not the elements and the imperfection of the weapons used by the Indians stood his friends.

The Indians used old flint-locks, and muzzle loaders with percussion caps—a sudden downpour, one of the many heavy showers that come now and again, drenched the enemy, and made useless their arms.

The hammers fell harmlessly, and Owen laughed in their faces as he raised his repeating rifle and fired with the unerring aim which had distinguished him in the chase.

He fired so rapidly that the Indians scattered in the wildest terror.

He would have had an easy victory, but for the coming of eight other dusky foes, attracted, no doubt, by the firing.

Now his peril was most imminent. The Indians did not remain in front of his too accurate weapon—they separated and swooped around him in a broken circle.

He could not fire on all sides at one and the same moment, and knew that the tomahawks of the redskins would bring him down on one or the other quarter.

"Daisy!" he cried, "ride for it—ride for it!"

"I won't leave you, Owen. I'll fight, too. Don't turn around, I'll defend your back."

The brave boy drew his revolver and waited for the enemy to come within range.

Still there was little hope for them. They were closing in on all sides, knowing that even Owen's magazine rifle would be useless in time.

A hot and burning sensation in the shoulder was the first sense Owen had of even being fired at.

He saw the smoke wreathing from the muzzle of the gun of the redskin who fired it, and singled him out.

The repeater rang out once again, and the Indian fell dead.

The fearful whoop of savage ferocity that went up then told Owen what to expect.

The whole dusky set bore down upon him—half a score of tomahawks flashed before his dazed eyes, and he felt as if his horse was shrinking from under him.

His aim was unsteady, his senses in a whirl. He was losing blood freely, and with it vitality.

Yet he became aware of a sudden change in the aspect of affairs.

He saw the Indians suddenly draw rein, their faces wearing an expression of the utmost terror—worse than terror—a superstitious awe.

Shaking off the threatening entire prostration, Owen turned one look over his shoulder.

He beheld Castro—not the Castro of an hour ago—but Castro with the face of a demon, a human tiger, a devil in the flesh; anything and everything that is ferocious, bloodthirsty, cruel, infernal.

Were Owen Memphis to live a hundred years, and his memory grow ever so fickle, the impression of that face would remain by him in all its vividness.

The rifle Boswell had given Castro made itself heard now. Five shots sped out of its shining barrel in nearly as many seconds, and then the Indians fled.

What a cry Castro gave then; never had Owen heard anything human to approach it, as the prairie phantom thundered on in their tracks.

Owen, smarting from his wound, and goaded to mad desperation, followed him, forgetting for the first time in his life that he was leaving Daisy alone and unprotected.

Castro emptied every chamber of his rifle, and then clubbed it.

His magnificent, ebony-colored horse seemed imbued with the same infernal spirit as its rider, and overtook the fleeing Indians as a deer would a jack-ass.

As Castro came upon his hated foes, one at a time, he brought the butt of his rifle down upon their skulls with a crash so sickening that even Owen shuddered.

The Indians had gone up the mountain path to the stronghold of their tribe.

Then Owen witnessed a scene that was like a dissolving view. He saw Castro riding up the summit of the mountain pass; he saw thirty or forty painted devils clustered there; he saw Castro, still whirling his gun in the air, with his reins in his teeth, dash through the phalanx of startled and terrified warriors, the cause of whose terror was explained in the exciting cry of:

"The phantom—the phantom!"

And this awful presence seemed to paralyze them.

Like a shadow Castro rode through, cutting down every one in his reach, and disappeared.

Owen came to a stand; he remembered Rutland now that this living specter was out of sight.

He would have ridden back then, but found himself surrounded, while a voice said:

"We heap shoot, you no surrender!"

Our hero was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FLAG OF TRUCE AND WHO TOOK IT—BOSWELL'S MESSAGE, AND ADAM CURSEWATER'S FEARFUL ANSWER—THE FATE OF OWEN.

Captain Boz had been surprised by a skirmishing

party who had entirely mistaken his strength, believing that only a portion of the camp was moving from the creek.

In this they were woefully sold, and after a brief engagement retired, dragging their wounded and dead with them.

It was then that Boswell heard the firing done by our hero and Castro.

Searching for the cause, he missed the boys and Castro.

This alarmed him.

"Those boys are in danger," he said. "Let those follow me who will."

But before he could start, Rutland came tearing into the camp on Snowflake.

The lad's face bore bad tidings, and Boswell waited to hear the worst.

"Where's Owen?"

"A prisoner, Captain Boz," answered Rutland, the old purple light coming back into his beautiful eyes.

"Where?"

"He rode up after Castro into the Indian camp on the summit."

Boswell uttered an oath.

"Boys," he said, to his followers, "if any of you capture two of those derved devils alive, I'll give you a hundred dollars apiece."

"Little Peter captured one," replied the Wolf. "Whar he's got to, thar ain't no way of finding out, I guess."

"Who'll venture to carry a flag of truce to those varmints?" asked Boswell, looking around upon the many swarthy faces.

"I arsk ter do it," came from the slit in Rough's wooden face, and he rode up to Boswell with as little show of offering to do a very hazardous deed as anything outside wood was capable of.

"You know the risks?"

"Mebbe scalped—or burnt—leave me to do it, Cap'n Boz, they'll think less o' me 'an enny o' the rest."

"You shall go, Rough; give me your arms."

Rough gave up his arms, and with a large white handkerchief tied to a long sapling, awaited his orders.

"Say to the leader," Boswell said, "that we have two of his Indians captives. They are not harmed and shall not be on one condition—I shall hold them as hostages for the safety of Owen Memphis. If they will let Owen return I will set them at liberty, but if they harm Memphis in any manner whatsoever, I'll put my prisoners to such torture that even an Indian was never capable of—do you understand?"

"You bet, cap'n."

"Go, then."

Rough rode away very complacently.

Boswell had not adhered to the truth in the message he had sent.

He had no prisoners—two of the dead remained on the ground, and he hoped simply to prevent the Indians putting Owen to death by torture until some chance of a rescue could be discovered.

The camp was under a somewhat sheltered position now, and Boswell hoped to decoy the enemy down into the deserted quarters at the creek.

Knowing every inch of the ground as he did, there would be little chance for the Indians to escape.

He waited in a fearful fever of impatience for the return of Rough, and Rutland's distress was painful to witness.

But each man had all his work in looking after himself, besides looking after those who were throwing up intrenchments and otherwise making the very best of their positions.

An hour had gone, and still Rough had not returned.

"I will go to them myself," said Rutland. "If Captain Digby is with them, they will not harm me."

"Harm you? perhaps not," said Boswell. "But they would detain you, and torture Owen in your very presence, to make his agony more acute; besides, who knows that Captain Digby is with them? Even if so, Captain Digby would have no voice when Adam Cursewater is the leader."

"But I should at least see Owen," persisted Rutland.

"And how much would he thank me for letting you go? Learn to wait, Daisy; all that can be done to save Owen, shall be done, even if I go into the enemy's camp in person."

"I say no more, sir."

"You need not," answered Boswell, "Rough is on the return journey; look."

Coming down the pass, the merest speck of white could be seen jolting and fluttering in the breeze, until a bend in the rock hewn road revealed Rough and his horse.

Boswell did not want Rutland to hear the reply, for their was a singular pallor upon Rough's face that boded no good.

"I will see him alone," said Boswell, dismounting.

Rough threw himself out of the saddle when he reached the spot where his master stood.

"Well?"

"Cap'n, 'tain't no good."

"Seems that it must be, since you have returned."

"The devil only lemme come back that I might make yer mad wi' my answer."

"What is it?"

"I tole him I couldn't understand, so he writ it."

Rough handed Captain Boz a slip of paper; it ran thus:

"It was not from any humane consideration that I let your messenger return, but I wanted you to have my answer. To the devil with you and your prison-

ers; from what I know of them, they will suffer torture, any torture you choose to inflict, and die with the indifference natural to them. Had you twenty-two of my creatures, I would not give up Owen Memphis for them; not because I have any feeling against him, but because he is *something to you*. To-night I give him up to my people, and every conceivable torture that the human mind can invent I will inflict upon him—as I will upon you when you fall into my hands.

"Let me add—should you and your gang not surrender before daylight to-morrow, I will send you Owen Memphis's heart for breakfast!"

"CURSEWATER."

Boswell staggered as if he had been stricken.

"My God!" he moaned, "and he means it. He is a MAN WITHOUT A SOUL!"

CHAPTER XV.

DOOMED TO A DREADFUL DEATH.

BOSWELL did not remain inactive long.

"Something must be done," he said; "we are in a good position now—d—them, we'll fight them in their own fashion."

"I reckon," said Little Peter, who suddenly turned up with two ghastly scalp locks in his belt.

An Indian scalp was his only weakness, and that arose from a deeply-rooted prejudice to the red man, inculcated in him in the early days of his not wholly guileless childhood.

"Turn the horses adrift," continued Boswell. "They won't go far, unless they can be put somewhere out of the way of the fire of the Injuns; we must steal upon the devils unawares."

"I'm thar," said Little Peter, "so's many others, some."

In less than half an hour nearly half the camp, in threes and fours, commenced scouting on foot, the only way to reach the stronghold of the enemy now.

For a time we will leave them to their perilous tactics, and return to Owen, whose capture had been so sudden and complete that he had not had time to strike a blow.

It was better for him that he did not strike a blow then, or his death would have been swift and sure.

As it was, the Indians disarmed him, tied his hands very roughly indeed, and took him to the leader of the plundering half breeds.

He kept a look out for Captain Digby, but did not see him yet.

He was confronted by a man of even bigger proportions than Boswell.

His features were almost hidden by a huge and coarse red beard, that left only his nose, eyes, and a little ruddy patch of cheek below the eyes exposed.

He looked repulsively fierce and cruel, and as much like the gnome of a hideous nightmare as one could conceive.

"Well, and who the devil are you?" said he, very loudly and very threateningly.

"I might return the question," answered Owen, boldly.

All the defiance of his gloomy pride was up in arms now, and he did not think nor care for the consequences.

The answer seemed to stagger the red-bearded ruffian.

"By—, you'd better be careful how you answer me," he growled.

"Why should I? Do you think that I'll bow to you, knowing that you will show me no more mercy than a cat does a mouse. I can but die, but I will not die in humility."

"Did you ever hear of Adam Cursewater?"

"Yes."

"From Boswell?"

"From Boswell."

"How many men are there in your party?"

"I never counted them."

"Quit your cursed insolence," roared Adam Cursewater, arising and making a motion as if he would strike him down, "or I'll brain you!"

"My death, or rather the mode of it, is a matter you have to decide; you are a brave man, Adam Cursewater; it no doubt fits you to strike a man whose hands are bound. I do not put myself at your mercy, I put myself at your disposal."

One of the half breeds approached Cursewater at this juncture.

He strode away from Owen after the Indian had spoken, and our hero, wondering what the next turn in events would be, was simply staggered to see Rough appear, and after a brief consultation, come to the rock-hewn seat that Adam Cursewater, for the second time, occupied.

Rough's wooden face revealed nothing, nor did his eyes seek those of Owen.

Cursewater, with a brutal smile, made Rough repeat, in his own quaint language Boswell's message, and as he wrote the answer, he read out every word as he wrote it, and cast covert glances from under his shaggy eyebrows at Owen.

Our hero affected not even to hear it, and when Rough was sent back, with a volley of insolent comment, Owen stood as if he were alone, with nothing but his own thoughts.

For a few minutes Cursewater sat perfectly silent, and contemplated Owen as if he had met a human puzzle.

"I shall repeat the question I last put to you," he said, slowly.

"And I shall repeat the answer," replied Owen.

"You heard my answer to your friend?"

"I heard it."

"I shall carry it out."

"Do your worst, devil—do it, don't sit there with a half a hundred Indians at your back and threaten a prisoner."

Cursewater arose up and left Owen, muttering:

"We shall see."

The next moment Owen was in the hands of his two former captors, and bound to a tree.

Four miserable hours he spent in this position, and when he was removed he was led to the summit of the rock which overlooked the camping ground of Roving Camp.

He was stripped of his clothing, though the pitiless rain was falling, and the wind roared through him with a damp chill.

With consummate cruelty he was bound to the trunk of a tree, three feet from the ground.

The foliage sheltered him from the rain.

But they lit a fire beneath his feet, and Cursewater stood before him as the flames began to rise and blister the soles of our hero's feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRST TASTE OF REVENGE.

"You will answer me in a few minutes," Cursewater said, tauntingly.

He did not perceive that the dampness of the earth, and the rain carried in beneath the tree by the fierce wind, were effectually putting the fire out.

"How strong is Boswell's party?" he asked.

Owen turned his eyes full upon the ruffian's face.

"The inquisition was built before your time," he answered, "and its worst tortures failed to wring confessions from its agonized victims. What care I for all the devil's tricks you may try upon me? Do your worst."

Adam Cursewater opened his eyes.

Such lofty defiance under the trying circumstances, the border bandit had never met with.

"You will alter your tone," he said, "by to-night. If not—"

A half-breed running hastily towards where he stood, drew his attention.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"The hunters are coming up the mountain sides in all directions. We shall be surrounded."

A shade passed over Cursewater's face, and then so pale did it grow, that those who did not know him would have thought it arose through fear.

It was only wrath.

"What does it mean?" he asked, fiercely. "Why were not the passes guarded?"

"You ordered the camp to be reconnoitered by a strong force."

"Well?"

"It was reconnoitered by fifteen of our best men. They found the camp deserted—and took possession."

The messenger paused. He had told this much calmly, and with a placidity that is so peculiar to the Indian character.

"Well?" repeated Cursewater, this time in a voice that suggested the first shock of an incipient earthquake.

"Boswell's men have swarmed the creek and driven your people into the stockade. They cannot get out."

"Cannot?"

"That is the case, chief."

"H—I's furies, and all this because I have fooled my time away with this hound!"

His hand sought his knife, and it is more than probable that he would have wreaked a summary vengeance, had not some scattered and desultory firing taken place; and with a cry to those who had placed our hero in his present horrible position, to follow him, dashed away.

Owen was left alone.

The dull day was now made gloomy as a cavern, by the gathering clouds that hung low and threatening.

It is hard to say whether the day is fading, or the morning coming on.

It is like an eclipse.

The wind has lulled, and the rain ceased. But Owen knows it is only the dangerous calm before a renewal of the storm.

The silence is intense, painfully intense.

The distant firing can no longer be heard.

Owen's limbs began to stiffen and ache, and the dank moisture goes through him, chilling his very bones.

A sound, faint and uncertain, reaches him. He tries to look down, but his range of vision is limited.

What is it—the snapping of a twig, or merely the collapsing of the fast dying fire?

Another sound, sharp and loud, and with an echo. That is the report of a gun. Still another sound; ah, he knows what that is!

The dull roar of the coming gale, and then all nature seems to break into fierce war and confusion.

Quick and continuous firing; the sobbing and shrieking of the wind, and sharp patter of the rain-drops upon the foliage above, as the heavy blast whirled the brightly burning embers of the smouldering fire up and around him. A few sparks strike and cling to his unprotected limbs, and feeling that he cannot even shift hand or foot, says:

"Cursed monster!" meaning Adam Cursewater.

Something rises in the gloom below him. He can look down enough to see that.

It is a tall figure in the garb of an Indian. A stolid face framed in long, dark hair, confined only by the feathery head-gear—a mere band—of the aboriginal.

The face is not only stolid—it is wondering. Where has he seen it before?

"Mister."

That word, uttered only in a hoarse whisper, reaches him and thrills him.

"Speak again; is it Rough, good fellow?" no longer only a cow-boy.

"That's me, I reckons, mister."

Rough, in masquerade.

"If I cut yer down yer'll fall."

"Cut me down."

The conversation is brief, but all that is necessary.

Rough, in masquerade, kicks out the fire, and cuts him down. He falls heavily, rises, staggers a few steps, and sinks upon his side.

"Dress, mister."

Rough, with his revolver out, is keeping watch, and hands him his clothes, and he gets into them with difficulty.

"Now for a rifle—give me a rifle."

"It's hid, mister—come wi' me—take this'n; I's got another."

Owen takes the revolver offered him, and stands erect.

"If I could only see that devil—if I only knew at which point he is."

"Let's get, mister; never mind the p'int. The cap'll think I's failed, an' I swore I wouldn't."

The firing around them is still kept up, and the gloom turns the day into night.

They creep away under the shadow of the rugged walls, frowning high on either side of them.

"Mister."

The word is a warning; a lion is in the path. A human lion, lying full length on its belly, and peering over a shelf with rifle poised.

Owen knows it is one of his deadly enemies. He pulls Rough back and draws his long knife, the only weapon they had left in his belt.

He creeps forward; a stone loosened by his left hand falls heavily, and the human lion—a stalwart half-breed, starts, up-turns—and seeing his danger scrambles to his knee.

But Owen is upon him as he raises his rifle; the ball hits—nothing.

Owen with one knee upon his chest, one hand upon his throat, and the other grasping the upraised knife, forces him back.

Rough would fire, but dare not for fear of hitting a friend.

The Indian is powerful, and struggles. He would search for his own knife, but that it requires all his strength to keep back his enemy's upraised hand.

Rough is at hand now and snatches up the fallen musket.

"Keep back!" cries Owen, in a savage whisper.

"Let me at least have vengeance on this reptile. He is my one!"

Rough holds back. The Indian rallies and arises, only to find himself clasped around the loins, swung off his feet and flung on the very rocky shelf over which he had been peering.

A swift blow, a gasp of agony, and he rolls over; his death yell is drowned in the hideous depth, and the moaning wind hums his only funeral dirge.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HORRIBLE PICTURE—SOME MORE WORK OF THE PRAIRIE PHANTOM—OWEN IS AGAIN A PRISONER.

"ONE red devil the less," said Owen, as he surveyed the surroundings, more to trace another foe than anything else.

"That's so, mister."

"Where is your rifle?"

"Right here; mebbe his'n 'll do me," answered Rough. "Hurry up, then, we have no time to lose."

They had not.

The enemy was scattered all over the mountain, and they might be pounced upon at any moment.

Rough led Owen down a defile so narrow that they could scarcely walk side by side.

At the bottom they came to a small plateau rather thickly timbered on the edges and slopes.

It was here Rough had hidden his rifle. It had not been discovered. He gave it to Owen and then signified that great caution was necessary.

It was here that he had had to steal by three Indians who had been picketed here.

"Mebbe they're skulking around still," he said.

"Look, mister."

Now, for the first time since they had met, Owen saw an impression stamped upon the wooden face.

No wonder he looked for the cause after such a phenomenon as this, with more than unusual interest.

He found it.

A ghastly sight; stark and stiff and upright, with their backs against the trunk of a tree, were two Indians.

Their tongues lolled out their eyes were strained almost from their sockets; faces swollen and blackened and horrible.

Owen went closer and was startled. He saw that a lasso of hide had been thrown with such skilful and deadly aim that it had wound round and round both necks and tree at once.

They had evidently lifted their hands to remove the thong, for their muskets lay at their feet, and their hands were still raised.

Whoever had thrown the lasso must have run round and round the tree, binding their bodies and lower limbs at every turn.

Then a short piece of separate hide had been placed around their necks, and drawn tightly, stoutly and cruelly, until the life was strangled out of them.

The only stains of blood came from ghastly numbers upon their breasts, from which the hunting shirts had been furiously torn.

"That's the Prairie Phantom's doing, mister—an awful devil."

"The strange being must have supernatural power. He is everywhere," answered Owen. "But they deserve it."

He moves away, getting under the shelter of the trees, stepping as cautiously and noiselessly as a trapper.

He looked back carelessly and without any particular purpose.

"We are followed," he said, catching a glimpse of three dusky forms stealthily crossing the plateau in the direction of the fatal tree.

Then came smothered yells of horror from the redskins.

They had discovered their unfortunate companions and were spellbound.

Owen and Rough concealed themselves in some high brush that offered them shelter, and still enabled them to peer through and watch the enemy.

"Only three," muttered Owen.

"Wait, mister; mebbe there's more."

"If not, we can make sure of two, and the other will find it hard to escape us then."

Owen's finger was already on the trigger of his rifle. He had suffered too much to be humane. He looked upon the lawless half-breeds as biped beasts.

"They would not spare me," he muttered, with a relentless gleam in his eyes. "Cover your man, Rough."

Rough raised his rifle, when a whoop so unearthly and appalling rang out that Owen started, and Rough dropped his weapon.

The Indians were panic-stricken, turned in mortal fear, and stared around them in a terror that mortal never could inspire.

Then they set up frightful cries, as a gaunt and terrible figure flew towards them, brandishing a tomahawk, and uttering the unearthly whoop that had smote upon our hero's ears, and stayed his arms.

Never had he seen human face so horrible in its mad frenzy as that now before him.

The figure was familiar, more so than the face, so distorted it was.

He recognized Castro. The Indians only saw the Prairie Phantom.

They did not even pause to use their arms, but dashed on directly toward the spot where Owen lay concealed.

"They'll be on top of us directly," said Owen, rising to his full height, and levelling his rifle at the nearest one, fired, killing him almost instantly.

Rough rose up too.

But the old musket he had missed fire, and the two remaining redskins, believing that they were ambushed, went to the right about.

Castro was upon them. The deadly tomahawk cleaved the skull of one of them; the other, driven thus at bay, made a stand.

Castro was like a fiend let loose. He grasped the gun by the muzzle, turned it upward, and closed with the last of the three.

Owen dared not fire now, and stood rooted to the spot, watching the struggle.

Castro's strength was equal to his frenzy.

The Indian was a child in his hands, though he fought with all the power of despair.

He was thrown down, and Castro's long knife soon did its fearful work.

Then he stood up and glared around him with a ferocity of expression that was nothing short of madness.

His eyes fell upon Owen; but for an instant there was no sign of recognition.

"Castro."

"Get to your people. Haste the way you saw me come," answered Castro, his nostrils distended and throbbing, his eyes ablaze.

Then with one of his appalling whoops, he rushed blindly into the woods, almost shrieking:

"Death—death!"

And that cry rang in our hero's ears, until the frantic, mysterious being was out of hearing.

"What fearful wrong has turned that man into a human tiger?" said Owen. "For he is nothing else."

Rough did not reply, not having any theory to offer, and they now began to hunt for the trail that would lead them back to Roving Camp.

Still the desultory firing could be heard. Owen wondered what had happened during his absence. He dreaded to speculate.

"This way, mister," said Rough, as he descended the wooded side of the plateau where a faint foot-trail wound its way through the trees.

Both kept a wary lookout, knowing that they were not safe for a minute, and were quite as likely to meet with enemies as friends.

Every step was fraught with danger, the brush being so thick here that they could not see two yards before them.

As they neared the bottom of the trail, they could hear the dull rush of the waters of the creek, which added to their caution.

Still there was nothing to do but go on, and accept the fortunes of war.

"Having come so far," Owen said, "we may escape the red devils."

But fate was against him; he had not met the worst yet.

At the bottom of the trail they struck a clearing; the creek was in sight, but the stockade was hidden from view.

"Safe!" said Owen.

Even while he uttered the word a guttural laugh drowned his voice, and he leaped around on the defensive; but ere he could press his finger upon the trigger, the weapon was dashed down, and he found

himself firmly held in the paws of two powerful Indians.

Rough was in precisely the same plight.

"How—how!" chuckled the redskins, tauntingly, "white face heap smart to Indian. Heap scalp you make fuss."

Then the prisoners' hands were bound, and they were dragged off to the stockade, where seven or eight Indians were grouped together.

The moment they set eyes on Owen they sent up yells of furious triumph, while some, recognizing the costume of a dead companion on Rough, commenced to tear it off in strips.

A brief and angry council was held, and Owen knew by their glances and gestures that they were deciding his fate.

He leaned against the side of the stockade, with his eyes darting defiance and hatred upon his captors, nor did he flinch when one of them, drawing his long knife, stepped forward and placed the point against Owen's throat without so much as uttering a word.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH THE CAMP IS SWEEPED AWAY, TAKING DEATH AND DESTRUCTION WITH IT.

How had it fared with Boswell all this time? He had secured a well-protected position, and one that commanded the creek, and thus shut up those whom he had so well trapped into the deserted camp of the gold hunters.

Boswell's first thought was of Owen; his second, a place of safety for Rutland.

A chance shot—a partly spent ball falling among them, might at one minute leave the beautiful boy a corpse.

"We must find a place of safety for you, Daisy," he said.

He had long since adopted Owen's mode of address when speaking to Rutland.

"I would rather you see to Owen's safety, sir," answered the boy.

"We will do that, too," answered Boswell, grimly; "or not one of the cursed hounds shall live to boast of their work."

"Will they kill him?"

"Not yet, and later they shall not have the chance—Wolf."

"Wal?"

"Won't you look after the party who are watching the creek? I shall have enough to do here."

"Whar you going, Boz?"

"To unearth Cursewater."

"I swear you're plucky. Halloo, some of the boys have found signs of the enemy," and Wolf hurried away.

This was the firing of Boswell's skirmishing party that had called Adam Cursewater away from our hero.

Boswell was still in a state of dilemma about Rutland, when Little Peter returned, and said that there was a natural cave higher up the mountain trail. That he had discovered it by the merest accident, and that he thought it would make a secure retreat for the "Doll."

"Show me where it is," said Boswell. "Follow me, Daisy."

Rutland obeyed in silence. The absence of Owen seemed to deprive him of the courage and energy he had already displayed in defense of his brother.

The natural cave was indeed a splendid retreat. Dry and warm, and well sheltered.

What harm could reach him here? None, apparently, and yet he would have been safer among the hunters. Who was to know that then?

"Stay in here, Daisy. It is safer than anywhere else. Fear not—you can rejoin the party below when things grow quiet, should I not be back by then."

"Save Owen; I'll stay here," was Rutland's only answer, and Boswell left him.

Little Peter stayed by his leader with a rough fidelity that showed the strength and power of association.

Here and there, behind a boulder, a tree, a bush, or peering through crevices rent in the rock, could be seen the crouching, cautiously-moving figures of the gold-hunters, as they crept on, panther-like, into the very lair of their prey.

They were well watched, however, for the slightest indiscreet move—the raising of a head, a momentary exposure of the body, or a hand improperly disposed of, would draw down the fire of the but too well-concealed Indians, and if the party thus exposed escaped with only a wound, he would consider himself lucky.

Anything like organized movement was entirely out of the question.

Every man fought on his own account, and acted entirely independently, each doing his best for the common good, and suffering proportionately for every individual blunder they made.

This form of fighting was kept up for some hours, and still the Indians held their ground.

To storm their stronghold in the dark would be sheer madness.

"What we cannot accomplish to-day," said Boswell, "we will to-morrow."

"I reckon," responded Little Peter, as they returned to the cave where Rutland was left.

The place was empty.

Boswell glanced at Little Peter in dumb surprise.

"Mebbe the little cuss air gone."

"But—what is this?"

Boswell stooped and picked up the boy's hat.

It lay almost at the mouth of the cave.

Further inspection revealed a patch of blood, and then a thin and broken trail of blood spots.

Boz turned pale and trembled.

"Good God," he moaned, "what has happened—has he fallen into the hands of the merciless demons?"

"Mebbe he ain't; let's see."

See! forlorn hope; would he have left his hat here of his own free will? would he—without something happening to leave a blood trail?

Later inquiry revealed the wretched fact that no one had seen Rutland since he had gone with Boswell.

He ground his teeth in fury.

His only hope was Rutland had been captured, and taken alive to the Indians, in which case his life would be spared, most probably.

Still the trail of blood haunted him.

By-and-by there was a little stir among the hunters.

Castro came into camp, and Captain Boz hailed him, joyfully.

"Do you bring news?" he asked.

"Of whom?"

"Rutland."

"Rut—ah! I remember, none."

"God help him!"

"But of Owen?"

"What of him? He is dead."

"No—he lives, he is a prisoner in the stockade. The lad Rough saved his life, and is a prisoner with him."

"Thank Heaven."

"Listen to me. If you would save the daring youth, storm the stockade before daylight. Less than twenty red men are in it."

"Thanks, friend, for that information, and if the attack should bring my cursed enemy to their aid, why, so much the better."

The storm had abated. The wind had gone on its destructive career, and nothing remained of the late cyclone but a steady and heavy fall of rain.

It made the night dismal and chill, and no one felt its monotony more than Owen during the painful stillness that reigned during every cessation of hostilities.

Faint from hunger and thirst, and worn out by fatigue, he would have met death with perfect indifference.

But he was spared for a time. The cold-blooded, scalp-loving rascal who would have murdered him with a knife, had been prevented by the rest from carrying out his fell purpose, and Owen, as we have said, utterly exhausted and played out, sank down in a corner of the damp and leaky shelter, and closed his eyes.

Rough was in a sitting posture, looking as stolid as ever. He closed his eyes, too, and what was more, slept.

Owen, on the contrary, his mind dwelling upon Rutland, listened to every sound from without the stockade.

"If they only knew that I am here," he thought, "they would storm the place."

How bitterly he felt the change of circumstances.

"Boswell thinks I am up in the mountain," he said, inwardly, "and will try to find me there."

As the hours flew by and night came on, his worn-out frame and over-taxed mind gave way to the requirements of nature, and he slept.

How long he remained asleep, it is not necessary to go into; but he was awakened by the terrific crash and rattle of musketry.

The Indians were whooping and yelling. The loud, hoarse tones of the whites could be heard as they sent back defiance with their bullets.

"Rough!"

"Mister?"

"Boswell is attacking the Indians here. We shall be released."

"Ef the Injins don't kill us; mebbe it's more like'n they will."

"If I could only get loose."

"Better oughter keep quiet," whispered Rough. "Here they comes."

Here they did come. The Indians were rushing for shelter under the stockade, and it was doubtful whether they had forgotten their prisoners or not.

The firing without was kept up with increased energy, and Owen's quick ear detected a return fire from the mountains.

Cursewater, with the remainder of his plundering devils, had come to the rescue of their people.

"Let us slacken their fire!" roared Boswell; "give it to the devils, and then charge the stockade! By—we'll have them out!"

Then a cheer from the rangers, a volley was poured into the mountain, and then Boswell gave the word.

"Close in, lads! One dash—charge the —whelps!"

Charge they did, going right ahead, firing at the enemy above, and striking the enemy below.

But there was one enemy they had never dreamed of.

They had scarcely crossed the line of Creek Camp when mountain and earth received a shock.

What was it?

Firing ceased instantly on both sides; there was a wild rushing, waving, tearing and hissing that drowned the cries of the Indians on the mountains.

A crackling of young saplings, and old trees carried away, and borne down towards the creek.

"A freshet!" called Boswell.

A freshet—it was an inundation. The dams of the creek had burst, the heavy rain had swollen the mountain rivulets, and now a mighty cataract poured down.

Everything was carried before it, stockade, trees, horses, men, whites and reds, all alike fighting for life against this too terrible foe, which swept the ground so clear of every sign of human existence that it was impossible to trace where Roving Camp had ever been.

CHAPTER XIX.

DESOLATION AND DEATH—A DREARY MORNING—BURIED ALIVE.

WHEN the morning came the rain had ceased; the clouds lifted and melted under the light.

The storm had passed.

Only a running stream, blackened and swollen, where Roving Camp had been not ten hours before.

Torn and rent trees, a few ghastly corpses, some heavy boulders displaced by the heavy crash, and a camp-fire more than a quarter of a mile away.

Around this camp-fire rested the remnant of the unfortunate gold hunters.

Most conspicuous among them, but not resting, was Boswell.

A footstep behind him brought him up sharply.

He was confronted by Little Peter.

For a moment he glanced into the giant's face without uttering a word.

What need had he to ask; there was no tidings in that quiet face. Yet he *did* ask.

"No news?"

"Guess not, cap."

"Not even the body of Owen found?"

"Not a hair of his head."

"What can be done?" and he moaned.

Little Peter was silent.

"There's no hope, Pete."

"That's what we'd better call it," was the sorrowful reply.

"Curses! I can't stand it, Pete. I can't stay here. Even the cursed enemy's deserted us."

"Mebbe it's fortunite, cap."

"Tell the boys we'll break camp. We'll follow the creek to its terminus. This accursed spot maddens me. Both boys gone—both; and I had boasted to save and protect them."

Little Peter turned away with something like a sigh.

The camp was broken up; the horses they corralled in the mountains still remained—not many, but quite as many as they had riders for.

Boswell looked at his little party in gloomy silence.

They were prepared and somewhat eager to revenge themselves upon the cause of their miserable disasters.

Little Peter rode close to Boswell—not for company's sake, for he never spoke a word—but possibly out of sympathy.

Every yard they went revealed fresh and painful evidences of the terrible work.

Still they kept on, though without hope of finding any of the living.

Vain search.

The men began to scatter, from sheer weariness of the desolate journey.

By-and-by one of them rode back to Boswell.

"Cap."

"Well?"

"We've seen a grave in the sands here."

"What is there in that?"

"We ain't looked yet," replied the fellow, taking Boswell's query literally; "that is, not far."

"Have you looked at all?"

"Enough to see a portion of the face, and it's awful like—"

The man paused, and looked half pityingly, half sorrowfully at Boswell.

"Well—"

"Like Memphis."

Boswell's face went pale, and his eyes shone like coals.

"Who would, or could have buried the poor lad?"

"The Injins, mebbly; all the fellows agree—"

"How?"

"All the fellows agree that he's been—" The man paused again, and then in an awed voice, "*Buried alive.*"

* * * * *

The common enemy that had so effectually done its fell work, had not spared the two prisoners of the stockade.

Rough did not realize the appalling danger of the moment. Owen's greater intelligence told him all.

"We're lost," he said; "nothing on earth less than a mountain can withstand this."

"What, mister?"

"We—everything will be swept away."

Rough uttered a yell like a wild beast.

So sudden and furious that it startled his captors, who were now cowering back from the great avenger.

The cow boy's great strength was exerted to an extent almost superhuman.

He burst the bond that held his wrists together, and still keeping up his excited and awful cries, made a dash at one of the Indians for his knife.

The Indian, startled out of his senses, and believing that Rough was suddenly possessed of the devil, gave a whoop and fled out of the stockade.

But not far.

The flood caught him up, hurled him back against the entrance with a sickening crash that laid him limp and doubled at the feet of our hero—dead.

"It's a coming!" shrieked Rough, frantically tearing at the knotted hide that bound Owen's hands.

There was no time to seek a knife now.

The water rose above their heads, then floated them till the roof of the stockade forced them under.

Then came a crackling, a crash, deadened by the roar of water, and the stockade was rent asunder, piecemeal, and swept away.

Throughout the frightful crisis, Rough had never let go his hold on Owen.

Both had felt the effects of suffocation to almost a fatal extent.

Now the first dash of damp night air revived them

as they went rushing down the tide with the torn and rent logs whirling around them.

"Let go of me, Rough, save yourself," gasped Owen, when his head was sufficiently out of water.

"I have a support."

He had got his arms over one of the logs that had been a portion of the stockade.

Rough let go, and Owen was swept onward.

Presently the log struck one end against some heavy obstruction.

Owen was hurled into the air, then fell again into the water.

There was a break here, and the stream, rushing over the lower part of the sloping bank, carried Owen with it.

He touched ground.

A moment's delirium. He ran a few paces higher up, not knowing how his limbs were numbed and cramped.

He fell—his head struck against a stone, and he lay still, stunned.

The greatest fury of the flood was over.

The water did not reach him.

He lay in this semi-dead condition when the first streak of day peeped down upon him, and a party of Indians rode past.

"Halloo!" said the leader, looking down.

"It's the dark-haired prisoner."

"Dead?" asked Cursewater.

"Not quite."

Cursewater dismounted—a cruel smile overspread his countenance.

He examined our hero.

"Not much of life in him—pity to leave him out here. Dig a hole—Boswell may find him then."

"Bury him?"

"Ay."

Even Cursewater's ungodly followers seemed staggered at this monstrosity, but they obeyed.

A grave was dug and Owen laid in it.

"We'll leave a sign, at least," said Cursewater, and he held up Owen's clasped and bound hands, while the rest kicked the dirt into the grave and trampled it down over his legs and body, and then laid it lightly over his face with a devilish refinement of cruelty.

"He will know his fate if he returns to consciousness," was Cursewater's brutal remark, and with a villainous laugh he remounted and rode on.

The grave looked strangely awing, with its ghastly sign, Owen's livid, clasped hands peeping through the soil, as if supplicating for mercy.

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE GRAVE—AROUND THE CAMP—FADING HOPE—KING FISHER, THE "BORDER TERROR"—NEWS.

So they found him when Boswell rode up, with this slight difference; the soft earth had been scraped off his face, and left the deathly features exposed.

Boswell uttered a groan.

"Yes," he said, with subdued fierceness, "he was buried alive!"

Then he knelt and helped scoop the sod away, and when that was done, gently lifted the body out.

Boswell stooped over it and made a careful examination.

"There's life," he said, "but only a spark; has anybody got a spoonful of whiskey?"

Every man that carried a flask produced it, but with doubtful looks.

They were all more or less empty.

"Squeeze 'em all dry in this," said Wolf, holding out a tin can.

The result was not luminous.

"Mebbe it's some good ter a sick man," said Wolf, grimly; "but thar's not enough, I swar, for a ten year old that ain't sick."

"It is enough to give life in this instance, perhaps," said Boswell.

It was a strangely new picture to see these rough and hardy-featured men forming a grim, silent, but not unsympathetic group around the pride of the camp.

In spite of his gloomy and brooding nature, Owen had endeared himself to every member of Roving Camp by his courage, his sense of justice, his unwavering truth and nobility of nature.

It was a day's long waiting and watching for the end of this struggle between life and death.

There was not a man in the crowd who did not rush off at any moment on the suggestion of their leader, to find something that would be of service to the youth.

Those whose minds were somewhat superstitious dreaded the setting of the sun.

Little Peter, the only one who had left the party for any length of time, came back dragging the hide of a bison with him, and curtly informed his companions where they could find the carcass.

Then he sat down and made Owen moccasins for his wounded feet, having the warm fur inside; and the feet having been already bathed and bandaged, the moccasins were strapped on very gently, considering that the hands of a giant performed the operation.

"If we only had some more stimulant," said Boswell, as the day grew older and our hero stronger.

The men looked sorrowfully and blankly at each other.

"It don't grow," said Little Peter.

No more was said on that topic, and the men moodily gathered around the camp-fire.

A stranger rode in among them. He was a tall, dashing, dare-devil-looking fellow. Under thirty years old, armed to the teeth, and otherwise well equipped.

"Good-evening, boys," he said, carelessly. "Don't be alarmed, it's only King Fisher."

King Fisher. The name sent a thrill through the camp.

King Fisher, the youngest and most daring outlaw, whose name was a terror both in Texas and Mexico.

Boswell knew him by sight as well as reputation.

"Halloo, Boss Boswell!" said King Fisher, just as lightly as if he were meeting a brother.

"You find us at a bad time, I guess."

"Pooh, we must take things as they come in life's journey, boss," laughed King Fisher; "what's gone wrong with you. Halloo, who's that?"

"One of us. The accursed Indian bloodhounds buried him alive!"

"What? The d—monsters—" yet this was the man who, with his reins in his teeth, and revolver in hand, would ride at full gallop through a town, and fire at every man sent out to capture him.

"He is improving, but we have no rum left."

"You ain't? Take mine, all of it—here."

"Thanks, Fisher."

"What's his name?"

"Memphis."

"The devil it is! He had a brother out with you?"

"Yes," cried Boswell, starting up. "Do you know anything of him?"

"Not much. I met him in company with an Englishman and a guide."

"Thank God for that!" answered Boswell, forcing the stimulant down Owen's throat, a few drops at a time.

"Owen," he said, "Owen."

Our hero had opened his eyes.

"Daisy!" was the first word that left his lips, "Daisy."

Our hero opened his eyes wider, smiled, closed them again, and fell asleep.

A shout went up; so far he was restored to life.

Boswell led King Fisher a little away from where Owen lay, and questioned him about Rutland.

"I met the party at daybreak this morning on the high trail," answered King Fisher, with a laugh of pleasant recollection. "I should have taken no heed of them if I hadn't heard some one sing out:

"Halt! Throw up your hands, or we'll fire!"

"They threw up their hands, the Englishman looking blue, the boy scared. Two black-skinned bandits wanted the horses, arms and money. The Britisher expostulated, cool as ice cream."

"Money," said he, and laughed; "where on earth should I get money from? Besides, it's rough on a feller who came all the way from England to see your country, and have a little sport, and d— ungentlemanly."

"That speech licked me, Boswell; I was for him in a minute. I was behind the two highwaymen, covered 'em and called; 'Don't turn, either of you. It's King Fisher talking, and you're both covered; put up your weapons and let the Britisher and the boy go.' They put up their arms and faced me, said they didn't mind if it was to please me, and struck a new trail."

"The boy, pretty as a picture, too, thanked me, talked rot about nobleness and the like d—n palaver, and asked me to go their way. I told them that I couldn't go. That it was too warm just at present with eleven deputy sheriffs on the lookout, each with the copy of a reward proclamation."

"Then the youngster: 'If you meet Captain Boswell's party my brother is with them. Say I'm alive and went back with Captain Digby to my uncle. I've no right to suffer such a life as they are leading. It sounded to me pretty derved selfish, but I guess he knows best.'"

"Ay," replied Boswell. "He hasn't got the heart of Owen; one is all fierce, unselfish love for his brother—the brother is all love for himself—such is life."

CHAPTER XXI.

ENDING THE VENDETTA.

"WHERE'S Daisy—is he here?" almost the first words Owen spoke on the following morning.

His first word had been "water." It was while the water was being given him he uttered the above sentence.

"Rutland is safe, but not with us," replied Boswell.

"A prisoner again?" and Owen showed terror at once.

"No, Owen, but rest, you shall hear all by-and-by."

"No—no, tell me now. Where is he?"

"This stranger will tell you," said Boswell, indicating King Fisher.

Owen looked up at the "stranger" and became a little interested in him.

"You, sir? I have never met you."

"No, and it is perhaps quite as well that you have not," laughed Fisher. "I am not a desirable acquaintance for any save the sheriffs. They like my company when they get it. The great difficulty with them is to keep me."

This was said with an air of entire enjoyment.

Long before he had finished Owen had measured his man, noticed that he was scarred on the face and neck, wrists and hands, undoubted proofs of many encounters, and that there was nothing of the rowdy though a good deal of the reckless adventurer in him.

He told the story over again of his meeting with Rutland. We will not repeat it.

Owen listened patiently, but not without exhibiting various emotions.

The first was surprise. Then partial incredulity. Then conviction, for King Fisher was much more minute with him than he had been with Boswell.

Rutland's message, rather more heartless than artless, wrung a groan from him.

"Then he went willingly," he said, stricken too deeply to hide it.

"Seemed to like the change, I rather guess."

"Oh, Daisy—Daisy!" cried out Owen, "you have deserted me to go back to those who will never—"

He stopped with his face buried in his hands.

King Fisher looked at him in silence, but without a sneer. This was a new phase in life to him.

He could not quite understand it, but he respected it.

"Will you follow them?" asked Boswell, "as soon as you are able?"

"No," cried out Owen, with sudden energy. "Let him go with those who can take care of him. I have been unreasonable in my selfish love. I have kept him from the pleasures and rest of a quiet home. I have subjected him to danger and privation. No; Rutland is right. I have been a thoughtless brute."

He actually arose to his feet now, and his eyes flashed.

"The path I have chosen is not for him. I will, at least, wait until I can give him a better home before I rob him of the one he has."

King Fisher got up and walked away. Who knows but the grand unselfishness, tenderness and solitary love of Owen did not awaken childhood's echoes in the breast of even this outlaw, whose career was marked by many a life that he would have to answer for—some day.

Owen isolated himself a little after this. Boswell held a council. What should be done?

"We've had a run of bad luck," he said, "our supplies are nearly gone, we have only a few tools left, and very little ammunition, unless there is more in the storage—the hole in the rocks. Maybe that has escaped."

"Better luck next time," said one.

"We ken try again," said another.

"We're not quite cleaned out of the dust," volunteered a third.

"Then thar's them varmints ter settle with," added Little Peter, being the first to openly show a thoroughly sanguinary mind.

"What says Memphis?" asked Boswell, seeing Owen.

"I say, go where you will and I will accompany you. Those who are left may as well try again," he said, moodily. "Besides, what does it matter?"

"It's settled, then," replied Boswell. "But we'll follow Cursewater's trail, anyway. First, let us see what we have left us."

They found the "storage," a cavity high up in the rocks, had escaped the general ruin.

This brightened them up. It gave them not only a little of everything they wanted, but it was the place where Boswell had secretly hidden what gold they had accumulated up to the morning of the attack on the camp.

They found many of their horses and two of the pack mules, and as soon as arrangements were completed they rode slowly away from the spot that had promised so much in the beginning, and only ruin in the end.

A distance of five miles was traversed, when they came upon one of the old ghastly signs of the Indian trail.

A dead redskin—his breast bare, and bearing a gory number.

"Halloo!" said King Fisher. "The prairie phantom at work. Aha, poor devil—lagged behind his party."

"We're on the track, then," said Boswell.

"There's more proof of it." Owen pointed to a bare gap in a tree, where the bark had been totally chopped away.

Owen rode up and examined it. He had been attracted by some black marks on the tree. The marks turned out to be letters.

"A message," he said, and called Boswell.

A message, truly. It ran thus:

*"Boswell and party
follow the trail of the
Bark Chips.
One of your party a prisoner.
Haste.
CASTRO."*

This had been written with a piece of charred wood.

They did not wait to conjecture who was in the hands of the Indians, so many were missing, and they wanted to hurry on in obedience to the summons.

Here and there, when the trees were few and far between, only slight traces of bark were found, as if Castro had carried it with him, and so eked it out.

The trail was steadily followed for two days.

Then the guide trail, namely, the chips of bark, suddenly ceased, and this occasioned a halt.

It was too significant to be disregarded.

One of two things they were sure of—either Castro had been surprised and captured, or he had discontinued the signs because of being in the vicinity of the camp.

Little Peter volunteered to go out and reconnoiter. It was hazardous, but then he was an expert trapper.

"Boys," said Boswell, "we'll light no fire to-night."

"As you say, boss," was the cheerful response.

Little Peter was about to march off, when a gaunt figure crept out of a thicket to confront him.

It was Castro.

"Most took ye for Injun," Little Peter grumbled.

"Go back!"

"Not by a—"

"Go back; it is known you are on the trail. The enemy is in ambush."

He strode on to where Boswell stood.

"Captain, you'd better retreat and wait for daylight."

"We are prepared, Castro, you see."

"They—"

What he would have said never transpired; a peppering volley of shots was poured among them.

"Charge 'em out of their d—d lair, boys!" yelled Boswell, furiously. "Charge 'em! Give them h—!"

Like a whirlwind the Gold Hunters swept on, reserving their fire until the dusky devils showed themselves.

There was an answering voice—the voice of Cursewater:

"Ay—charge, d—n you!" and he showed himself, making straight for Captain Boz.

"At last!" roared that hero, raising his rifle, but before he could pull the trigger, Cursewater, who was already taking aim, fired.

Boswell uttered a great oath, and reeled in his saddle. He was hit.

This brought a whoop from the savages, and a yell of vengeance from the whites.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE VENDETTA IS ENDED.

At sight of Boswell, bleeding and reeling in his saddle, Owen's eyes flashed fire, so did his gun.

Cursewater uttered a snarl like a wounded wolf, and his rifle dropped from his hands.

"We are equal now!" cried Boswell, throwing his away and drawing his revolver.

Cursewater did the same, and now these two giants charged each other at full gallop, firing as they met, both receiving shots, but not fatal wounds, however.

Then their horses met with a shock that was terrific.

They tried to grapple each other, but the horses going down as if struck by an unseen cannon ball, the riders went with them.

Both men tried to extricate themselves as rapidly as possible to get the advantage.

But they suffered equally in the fall, and it was difficult work getting into position.

But all passions when intense are mighty stimulants, and the passion of fierce hate in these two hearts took them beyond all sense of physical suffering, and they glared into each other's eyes with faces on which nothing human was left.

Cursewater was in a reclining position, resting his shoulder against the back of his horse, which had broken its neck.

Boswell was on one knee, but, even in that position, unable to keep his body erect without resting his left hand on the ground.

Cool as flagstones in winter, they both took aim and fired until not a shot was left.

Then they hurled their pistols at each other, and then drew their knives.

The shock with which the horses had met threw them some six feet apart, and now this space had to be crawled over by these brute beasts in human form.

Neither felt inclined to die without the fiendish satisfaction of having killed his man outright.

So they crept along together on their hands and knees, bleeding like pigs, gasping like dying ducks, glaring like demons.

Horrible—sickening—repulsive!

They neared each other. They could feel each other's hot breath, and now they tried to strike.

Boswell, lifting his right hand from the ground, overreached himself, and fell forward.

He heard Cursewater give a demoniac chuckle, and felt his knife.

The dying wretch's hand was nerveless, and his arm was weak.

The knife-blade only feebly entered the fleshy part of Boswell's quivering back.

The first touch of the knife started all the vitality he had left.

Cursewater was drooping over him. Boswell raised his knife, and drove it clean to his heart!

Cursewater, with a sigh, rolled over, dead!

A smile of grim triumph lit up Boswell's ghastly face.

Then he looked around him, startled.

"No one here," he said, hoarsely.

His eyes rolled fearfully.

"Deserted!" he gasped, and sank back.

Then after a pause:

"Owen," he whispered—"Owen—it's—it's getting dark—dark! Owen—"

It was dark—oblivion, and Owen was not there.

The sudden onslaught had kept every one well employed, and after the first shock each man had no eye for anything but his own chances of victory and safety, for no one saw the enemy in front.

Even Owen, directly after he had fired that shot at Cursewater, found himself menaced by an ugly half-breed, and had to turn, too.

But the fall of their leader shook the nerves of the Indians; they wavered, and then Little Peter yelled:

"Charge 'em, the d—d skunks!"

And Castro, in a voice never to be forgotten, thundered:

"Annihilate them!"

They turned and fled.

The whole party of whites went in hot pursuit. Owen with them.

Driven at bay almost at every fifty yards, the Indians made a stand—only a forced one, and of short duration.

Those who could not outride the whites were cut down, and then the party returned slowly and solemnly, but covered with victory and wounds.

Owen and Little Peter were the two first who dismounted by Boswell's side.

"This has been awful work," Owen said.

"I reckon that durned Cursewater got the worst on't. I'll bet—"

"Eh! Boswell breathes."

"Thet's more'n t'other chap does," said Little Peter with grim irony.

"Halloo, the boss is down!" said King Fisher, striding up. "There's just a skin of a chance, is there?"

"Of his living?"

"Yes."

"I should scarcely like to say. Poor Boswell."

"Let me see."

"But he seems to be wounded all over."

"That's so; but now then—hurrah! this wound isn't fatal; wait, let me get my instruments out, and extract this ball; now then, there's another in the left arm, and a pistol bullet-shot won't hurt. Another under the right breast bone; let's probe—well, that ain't far enough in to do very great damage. Halloo, what's this?"

Now King Fisher left off his bantering tone, and looked grave.

"This is the mischief—a rifle ball—it entered here, but where it is gone to I can't even surmise, yet—"

"But there's another wound in the neck."

"Oh, that's only a flesher."

"And the back?"

King Fisher, after examining:

"That's a knife wound. Now, boys, all the spare rags you've got I'll make a requisition on."

Not one liked to admit that he'd "nawthin" to suit.

One said he'd a bandage around his leg.

"Yank it out, and let's have a look at it," responded King Fisher.

Reluctantly the bandage was taken off. Little Peter, losing patience, grabbed an end of it, and whipped it off.

"Here—h—" shrieked the loser, and then there arose a burst of loud laughter.

A lock of long hair was wound around his leg, the ends confined by two pieces of pink ribbon.

Even Owen could scarcely repress a smile, though the fast ebbing life of Boswell made him angry at the delay.

He put a stop to anything like "chaff."

"This is not the time for jokes," he said, with his old and well known flash of the eyes. "I don't sneer at a man who shows a little human feeling. Have none of us any memories—sacred ones—that we would wish to keep from every eye but our own?"

Those who had made a dive at the love token drew back. Its owner picked it up, and cast Owen a grateful glance.

He had made a friend for life of that man.

"Boys," said King Fisher, "you can build a fire here, and camp, unless you care to go and leave the boss—"

He was answered.

The men went to work as men who are accustomed to making sudden camps would.

They could bandy jests in the face of death, and curse in the hottest moment of conflict, but they never thought of deserting a leader till they had nothing left to do but bury him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STORY OF OWEN MEMPHIS—A REVELATION.

WE will let slip a week or so—a week whose events can be so easily imagined, knowing in what condition our friends were left.

The wounded to be attended to, and the dead laid beneath the surface of the earth.

Far away from that dreary and much thinned camp, an Indian colony—of the peaceful Comanches—was located.

The fields were tilled and cultivated, and the whole colony had the appearance of a little paradise.

One building, strong in timber, oblong in shape and with a distinctiveness that made it conspicuous from the rest.

A mission house.

A little side door at the rear of the building is open, and upon its threshold stands a man whose nativity, calling, and duty here can be explained thus briefly:

A missionary, a North American, and an earnest worker.

It matters not whether he was meditating or not, but suffice it, that while he stood there, one of the young men of the tribe hurried towards him.

Within six paces he stopped short in deference, affectionate deference to the "good spirit" of the tribe.

"Will the white father come forth? There are people who belong to his people coming in."

The missionary started.

"Coming—are here!" he cried, with a thrill of joy.

"They are come, they come sadly. They bring their white chief wounded. He is going to the Great Spirit."

"Enough; follow me, White Cloud; nay, guide me, I would see my white brothers."

He hurried away towards them.

There he met a weary cavalcade; ten men on horseback—horses jaded and walking with difficulty—four men carrying a litter with a burden that could not be mistaken.

"Welcome," said the missionary, heartily; "welcome, my brothers. I see you have affliction among you; come with me."

Then he called to White Cloud:

"Let some of your young men take the horses; my brothers will come with me."

Then he stopped and looked with intense interest at a handsome, dark-haired youth, who walked by the side of the invalid.

That youth was Owen Memphis.

Two days' rest, and quiet, and care.

The missionary's own quarters had been given up to Boswell. The missionary had heard the story of the expedition, its first flush of success, and the devastation that followed.

Boswell was sitting propped up in the missionary's truckle-bed. He saw the missionary. He looked for another face.

"Owen," he said, his own pale face, waxen, but very peaceful.

"Yes, brother; I will fetch him."

"And the others?"

"Yes, brother."

Owen, never out of call of his dying friend's quarters, came in.

"Owen," said Boswell, "I feel that I ain't long for this place. I don't complain of that. I made the bed for us all, and it's no blame if I get the hardest corner in it. But Owen, lad, we sha'n't strike the trail home together. Pard, you'll let me speak to him?"

"Certainly, brother."

"I'd like to hear Owen's story. He promised it me. I want to know what brought him out here. Owen, sonny, I like you, and—maybe I can help you. I'll try."

Owen was silent for a moment, and looked down.

"You see, pard," continued Boswell, "he ain't one of us. He speaks Spanish. He's the smartest horse-man of the crowd. In a word, he's a thoroughbred. Memphis, tell me."

"Memphis—Memphis!" exclaimed the missionary.

"Memphis, of Virginia?"

Owen started.

"That is my mother's name," answered Owen.

"My father's was Cardiff."

It was the missionary's turn to stare now.

He laid his hand upon Owen's arm, and peered closely at him.

"Your face reminds me of one I have seen in the past. Memphis—Cardiff? Tell your story, my son."

"It is a long one, sir, but I will try and make it as short as possible. It is a painful one. Both my parents are dead, and my mother lies under a slur."

"Let us judge of that, my son."

"My father, Owen Cardiff, was the eldest son of an English baronet. He came to America, being a huntsman and sportsman—fond of the chase, of horses. While out here he met my mother, who was then known as the white rose of Virginia. Love on both sides was the result. My mother's brother opposed the match. My father wrote home to Sir John Cardiff, and hinted at what had taken place."

"Sir John wrote back, and in his deplorable ignorance of this country, swore that he'd disinherit my father sooner than countenance such an alliance."

"Then my father said he would renounce his title and country. This one was good enough for him. He had never known what real life was until he came here. He would no longer be a slave to tradition and conventionality."

"He told my mother this, but did not write it home. He was dependent on his father for his fortune. For the sake of whatever family he might have in the future he dreaded to lose that."

"He persuaded Rhoda Memphis to marry him on the sly; she consented, and left her home. The marriage was a happy one. No one could trace them; and my father's remittances came the same as ever."

"We had a happy home, if not a grand one. My brother's and my education was looked after by our parents, and he left nothing undone to fit us for the society he had enjoyed and moved in in his younger days. We were therefore taught all the accomplishments that stamps the traditional gentlemen. Horse riding, use of firearms, languages, and the rest."

"Suddenly my grandfather, Sir John, died. My father was going out when the sad news arrived. He said he could think better and quicker on horseback, and told me to follow him."

"We were already mounted, and started off for a gallop. Something was wrong with my father's horse, or with him or both. He was thrown—and—"

Here Owen gulped down a sob—"and—killed."

"My mother wrote to his relatives, and confessed the whole story, not for herself, but for Daisy's and my sake."

"The reply was through a solicitor. Proof was demanded, a copy of the registry, the testimony of the witness, the corroboration of the minister, and all that."

"My mother went to her own family. Her brothers shut the door in her face, and turned her out in the cold."

"Now came the worst blow of all. My mother had no copy of the registry of marriage—the witnesses even dead—the church destroyed by fire, and the registry burned with it."

"Still she went to England and made her claim—she wanted nothing but justice to her children. The title she spurned, the country she had no affection for, but she wanted us to be righted."

"They pitied her, but laughed at her claim—my father's brother, his junior, came in for his estates. He offered my mother a sum of money to give up all claim upon the family."

"She refused—returned heart-broken—sold off our home, and in less than a year died."

"Then her family came, and offered to take my brother, Daisy—I spurned their offer—when my mother was dead they kidnapped my brother, and I was out in the world alone."

"Remembering my solemn promise to my dying

mother I took my brother away. I wandered with him to Texas, and got a home in a rancho, and was happy till a thief in the person of a Captain Digby came and robbed me of all that was left to love. The rest you have heard, sir, in the story of my connection with the noblest friend I ever met, Captain Boswell."

A murmur arose. Boswell's eyes gleamed with pride and pleasure.

"I knew it. I knew my Owen was all, and more than he seemed to be."

Then all eyes were turned upon the missionary. His face was buried in his hands, and he groaned audibly:

"Did your mother ever mention the name of the minister who officiated?"

"Yes; Elfton Sorrell."

"Thank God; there is no mistake. I am Elfton Sorrell, and the registry of marriages is not destroyed. I always kept that, and left a copy in the vestry of the ill-fated church."

But for that helpless figure on the bed, those present would have set up a howl of delight.

"Ah, my boy," said Boswell, with a twinkle in his eyes. "My Sir Owen Cardiff, you shall have your title yet."

"Never," responded Owen, with his old spirit. "Never. I am American born. This country is my country. I want no title, but I want to see my mother righted, the slur taken from her name, and Daisy saved from want."

There was no wasting a cheer at this, for the dying man joined in it.

"She shall be righted," cried Sorrell, excitedly.

"I will leave my people to carry into court the registry, and swear to the truth before God's appointed tribunal of justice. My people will spare me for the short time. They must. I owe a duty in this to my God, to the dead, to you. I will do it."

"And I'll help!"

This was said firmly, almost triumphantly, by Boswell.

"I want you all to listen, boys. I want you to write it down, pard, and I'll—I'll sign it."

"What is the nature of the document you want written, brother?"

Boswell sat up straight, and said, loudly and impressively:

"My will!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FAREWELL—RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

It might be said, with some degree of accuracy, that when Boswell made his "will," he had committed his last "deed" in this world of hopeful expectations and crowding disappointments, for he survived it only two days.

His full share of the ill-fated gold he gave to Owen, together with whatever personal effects Owen might like.

To the missionary he gave a letter to his "pardon," Zac, with orders that the Rev. Sorrell should have all his expenses paid in journeying with Owen.

"You'll stand by him, missionary?"

He pointed to Owen.

"Faithful, brother."

Boswell smiled slyly, and his eyes twinkled quizzingly.

"That's right, sir. I want my Sir Owen Cardiff to be righted."

And then he sank. His courage and strength could not keep back grim Death, and when at last Owen peacefully closed the sufferer's eyes, it seemed that the splendid fellow only slept.

"My first, my only friend," cried Owen, with a great sob.

We must anticipate Owen's tedious and dangerous journey, and meet Captain Digby in Richmond, Virginia.

Arrived at Richmond, Va., Captain Digby took Rutland straight to the house of Mr. John Memphis.

"So you found the runaway, Captain Digby?" he said, taking Rutland to him kindly enough, but not without a tinge of pity in his voice and expression.

"Poor boy—poor, unhappy Rhoda's face!"

"Poor, unhappy Rhoda," was Owen's dead mother—the sister of Mr. Memphis.

Then when Rutland had been sent off with the lady of the house, Captain Digby and Mr. Memphis sat down for a confidential confab.

"What of Owen, Captain Digby?"

"Owen—either killed by an inundation or the Kickapoo Indians, under the leadership of as great a ruffian as ever escaped unhung."

"It is strange that Owen should be of such a nature."

"He was strong and fierce tempered, and old enough to go his own way and choose his own companions—but to drag poor little Rutland in with him was simply an outrage."

Then Captain Digby told the story of the expedition of the gold hunters and the fatal result of the vendetta.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Memphis. "But for you that boy would have been destroyed with the rest."

"I fear so."

"You really wish to take him to England?"

"Unless you oppose it."

"No—no, Captain Digby. It is better for him, but you will remain here for awhile—at least till you and Rutland have thoroughly recuperated."

"With pleasure, Mr. Memphis," replied Captain Digby, who felt there was no danger of being thwarted in his mission.

He sent a glowing account of his excessively

troublesome journey—enlarged rather strongly, for a man of good birth and culture, upon Owen—painting him as black as the King of Infernals; assured his "dear kinsman," Sir Rowland, that there was no existing proof of the "wretched messalliance"—giving it as his belief that, "the boy's father had no doubt intended to marry the lady when he obtained full possession of the estates, but his untimely death prevented it."

He added to this that the death of the malignant and unreasonable eldest boy was due to his association with a gang of outlaws, which whom he met his death.

Then he became perfectly tranquil, having cast dishonor upon a noble woman, not in this world to defend herself, and proclaimed our hero and the gentle Rutland bastards.

What would the coward have said had he known that on the eve of the very day he mailed this communication, Owen and Mr. Sorrell put up at the best hotel in Richmond.

"When do you intend calling upon your uncle, my dear Owen?"

"To-night, sir," answered Owen; "now, if you are ready, Mr. Sorrell."

"Certainly."

The servant at Mr. Memphis' was not a little surprised at the lateness of the visit, and seemed to wonder where he had seen that dark, handsome face before.

"Is Mr. Memphis in?" asked Owen.

"Yas, sir, wid Cap'n Digby in der dining-room. Who'll I say, sar?"

"Sir Owen Cardiff and his friend," answered Owen, with his old fierceness of look and manner, and a sudden gleam in his splendid eyes.

The servant stared.

Owen repeated it in a still more imperative tone, and the servant carried the name in to his master.

Mr. Memphis looked up in dumb bewilderment.

Captain Digby turned deadly pale, and nearly fell out of his chair. Then he burst into a loud laugh.

"There is no such person," he said.

"Show him in," said Mr. Memphis.

They both spoke at once. The man turned away to obey his master.

A moment's dead stillness and suspense, and Owen entered, followed by Mr. Sorrell.

Digby started up. Mr. Memphis, after sitting in speechless surprise, got out of his seat and went forward.

"Owen," he said, "what name did you send in?"

"My own, sir. But before you go any further, let me introduce my friend, the Rev. Mr. Sorrell, a gentleman who has traveled with me from the very heart of Mexico, has left his colony, to prove that the name I gave is mine. He brings with him the official register of the church in which my mother was married, and which we all thought was destroyed with the church. He, sir, performed the nuptials."

Memphis, after standing awhile as if stunned, threw himself into Owen's arms and burst into tears.

"Oh, my poor sister! poor, bitterly wronged and misjudged Rhoda, and you too, my poor boy!"

"I never doubted my mother, sir."

"No—no, God bless you; a son's love has shown a brother his blindness—his wickedness!" here he broke down.

"Where is Daisy, sir?"

"Rutland—I will ring for him."

"I will send him to you, sir," said Digby, staggering from the room.

"My God!" he gasped, as he reeled against the hall wall with his hand to his brow, what is this? my sister and her children ruined. Her husband to be robbed of title and estates—never. I will silence that cursed missionary—I will destroy the proofs—I will destroy them all, rather—"

How soon one event in a man's life may hurl him into the vortex of crime; this man, whose sins heretofore had been only what the world would call vices, was ready to send his soul to perdition, that the usurper might keep the property of the already too shamefully wronged.

When Mr. Memphis later on sent for Captain Digby, he was startled with the reply the servant brought.

Captain Digby had left the house.

Now chance or the devil helped Digby, while the demon was still within him, and his mind was in a whirl.

He walked rapidly, and almost wildly through the now nearly deserted streets, rambling into that part of the city where houses were few and pedestrians fewer.

A cry smote his ears—a human cry of distress, and then of pain, as if the person who uttered it was struggling.

He hastened in the direction of the sound, and beheld two figures in the gloom. One was just falling backward, with both hands raised as if to shield his face. The other, with an arm uplifted and a weapon in his hand, struck—or struck at—the falling man, who, without uttering another cry, lay huddled and still.

The murderer then knelt down to rob his victim. Captain Digby stole upon him unawares, pounced upon him like a panther, and held him down.

"Devil, take your hands off him!" he hissed.

The murderer was too terrified to rise, to struggle, to move. He was helpless. He gave up his arms to Digby, and then Digby, standing over him with a cocked revolver, made him look to the condition of his victim.

"Well?" asked Digby.

"De—a—d!" shivered the man.

Then he was down on his knees and going to implore for mercy.

Digby cut him short.

"Bah! let the man's property stay on him. I'm no officer; it was done before I could interfere. You may be of use to me. It shall remain with you whether I give you up or not."

"Sir—mister—I'll—I'll be—"

"My slave?" and Digby laughed.

"Your slave—your dog—anything!"

"Come, then."

Digby did not fear him then. He alone held the hangman's noose over the ruffian's head. He had murdered the unfortunate man for his valuables. Digby thought him a fool to risk so much for so little.

He could not see the analogy between this animal and himself.

Yet the valuables of the murdered man were, to the murderer, what Digby's share of the Cardiff estates would be to Digby.

The means in both instances of obtaining either being one and the same—murder!

CHAPTER XXV.

A DIABOLICAL PLOT—THE MURDERER'S WORK—THE FIRE—HORRORS.

THE next day Mr. John Memphis received a letter from Digby, in which the writer stated that it was his intention to proceed at once to Europe to prepare Owen's relations for the startling and painful revelation so soon to fall upon them.

He had no doubt, he added, that Owen would prosecute his claim in England.

Now this letter was a blind. It was a lie in black and white.

Digby, far from hastening to Europe, underwent a metamorphosis. He had his hair cut very close at one barber's.

Then he went to another and told him to take off his rather handsome beard and whiskers, leaving only a mustache.

Then he sent his "slave," the red-handed villain who had given himself up, body and soul, for his luggage from his old lodgings, and took it to his new ones.

That night, in the new lodgings, where he had gone as James Lee, from New Orleans, he, with his own hands, cut off his mustache.

Then he sent his creature, whose attractive cognomen was Gallasby, to watch the home of Mr. Memphis.

It was two days before Gallasby returned with any fair report.

"Well?" asked James Lee, the false.

"Wall, cap, I squared one of the black gals up to the house, and was told that the little 'un was still there, but t'other and the parson hed gone inter lodgings."

"Did you find out where?"

"I did, you bet, and it's writ down."

"Did you find out why the elder boy had left the house?"

"'Cos he was mighty proud, and wouldn't stay under no roof whar his mother hadn't been allowed. That is, till she were quite cleared, whatever that might mean."

"Very well; watch that house!"

"It's a frame house—not a big 'un—won't be over much trouble to square that."

"Very well. I must have every scrap of written paper, or books, written in, or documents of any kind the parson may have, at any cost."

"Good enough, cap!"

And Gallasby began his watching without knowing that Lee was watching him.

Now Owen, though he lost no time in setting to work to prepare every bit of available evidence that would strengthen his claim, found many causes for delay.

He hired a good lawyer, and the lawyer, seeing that he had a case that would give him a high place among his more fortunate brethren, devoted time and energy to trifles, made mountains out of mole-hills, and, in fact, fully intended to make a year's job of it, if possible.

"I think," said Owen, to his friend Sorrell, one night, "I'll go over to see Mr. Memphis;" he never called him uncle.

"Very well, my dear Owen. I have to write out a detailed account of the marriage and what I know of it, for the lawyer. You will find me here when you return."

He did, but not in the sense that Sorrell meant.

Owen, when he returned late at night, was surprised to see that the room door was partly open, and the interior of the room quite dark.

"Sorrell has gone out," he thought.

He pushed the door open. Then he came to a stand.

A dreadful elongated shadow on the carpet, stopped his breath and made his hair rise.

He stooped and touched it with his hand.

Then he uttered a wild cry and dashed down stairs to arouse the house and get a light.

Accompanied by all the male inmates and some of the females of the house, he returned to the room.

His worst misgivings were more than realized.

There lay poor Sorrell, stark and still, blood pouring from a wound in his head, his clothes disarranged as if every pocket had been ransacked and left in the disorder occasioned by the operation.

The satchels and trunks had been torn open, papers in shreds strewn the floor, and the rest of the contents of the boxes was thrown around indiscriminately.

The truth rushed upon Owen at once.

Had the wretches committed the deed only for robbery, they would have taken Mr. Sorrell's watch.

But no, nothing likely to be traced was missing; nothing but the *Register of Marriages*.

Poor Owen groaned aloud in his anguish, as he knelt by Mr. Sorrell.

A doctor was sent for.

"A fractured skull," he said, tersely. "Poor fellow—bad case—must be removed where he can have the benefit of combined skill."

So he was removed.

The lawyer came, and nearly tore his hair out.

"Good God!" he cried, in bitter disappointment.

"The only witness living worth having, and the chances are that if he does not die, his mind will be impaired."

"You should have taken my advice, sir," replied Owen, calmly, but sternly, "and left here without delay. What more could you wish than the certificate and the parson?"

"What more? Anything—everything we could get. As to your advice, sir, you forget you employed me to give you my advice. I did my best."

"And ruined me," said Owen, and he turned away.

After this dreadful affair, Mr. Memphis would not hear of Owen staying anywhere but with him and Rutland.

Richmond was excited over this second desperate deed, coming as it did so soon after the murder of an unknown man, upon whose person was found all his property.

The whole terrible affair was wrapped in mystery.

"I'll send over my agent," said Mr. Memphis, "to hire berths in a steamer that will shortly leave Chesapeake Bay. This proves that we must lose no more time. You," he continued, to the lawyer, who was present, "have the written statement of poor Sorrell?"

"Yes, sir; thank God that remains, but it is not corroborated by any witnesses."

"Never mind, we must do our best. If Sorrell should recover he must follow us; I will take state-rooms in the *Ariel*."

"Permit me to fulfill that commission," said the lawyer, "we shall have to leave here the day after to-morrow."

* * * * *

"What news, Gallasby?" asked Lee, almost at the same hour and on the same evening that the conversation first recorded, between Memphis and the lawyer, took place.

"Not much—that parson feller's in a bad way."

"Well?"

"The young gent's gone back to his uncle, and is agoin' to stay there."

Lee's eyes glistened.

"You are sure of it?"

"Yes."

"That will do."

An hour later Lee was on his way to the office of the shipping agent and bought a first-class passage in the *Ariel*. He said he wanted it for a gentleman who was an invalid, and whose meals must be served in his state-room.

Then he went back, and when Gallasby came again they held a secret conference.

Whatever infernal scheme it was Lee propounded then, it made even Gallasby shudder.

"It's equal to murder," he said, startled and white.

"Murder! You're used to that. You've named your price; you know the alternative."

"I'll do it, boss—yes, I'll do it."

The next night—the night before Lee, and, unknown to him, Memphis and our hero would leave for Chesapeake Bay—Gallasby was prowling about in sight of Memphis' house until every light was out, as he supposed, and the whole household wrapped in sleep.

Mr. Memphis and Owen had stayed up late, completing their arrangements for departure on the morrow.

It was not until Mr. Memphis was ready for bed that Owen joined his brother, who had been asleep some hours.

Owen, without disturbing him, got into bed, and was soon asleep, dreaming his Texan and Mexican life over again.

Surely the dream was terribly real, for he was once more battling with the fire at Boswell's ranch. How real the smoke was—and the heat was—and the dazzling, dazzling blaze was.

Something awoke him. It was a piercing shriek from Rutland. Owen leaped up.

Great Heavens! His was no dream—it was a fearful reality.

The room was ablaze. He flew to the door and tore it open. The staircase was a furnace of roaring fire.

The whole building was in flames, on both sides, and the crowd without surged and yelled, and fought feebly with the devastating elements until the roof fell in, and the cry went up that the people of the house had perished in the flames.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LAST.

THE *Ariel* steamed out of Chesapeake bay when the sun was shining, and the weather propitious.

The passengers were aboard; the invalid—Mr. James Lee, was snugly shut up in his state-room; a few hours, and the little floating world was in perfect order, above and below, and its ruler happy.

It was not until night that the invalid arose from his bunk where he had been resting all day, and crept softly out of his state-room to go on deck.

Wrapped and muffled up as if it were winter, and assuming a feeble step, as if he were in reality an invalid.

Two or three gentlemen—not given to sea-sickness, were on deck.

They felt some sympathy for the invalid, but suggested that it was unwise for him to court the night air.

He smiled, and answered, by no means feebly, that his greatest dread was sea-sickness, and felt better on deck if he might sit down.

In time the conversation turned upon the late doings in Richmond. He inquired about the dreadful conflagration.

"Arson," said one gentleman.

Then he expressed horror at so fiendish a deed.

"Were there any lives lost?"

"Three."

He shuddered. Did anybody know the names of the unhappy victims?

No one. The bodies had not been identified.

No one heard the sigh of relief the invalid could scarcely stifle back; no one saw the lurid gleam of wicked triumph in his eyes.

No, nor did the fiendish impostor see what was happening below.

The steward had opened a state-room door, and left it open while he trimmed the light.

A young gentleman, passing at that moment, peered in, addressed the steward on some matters concerning himself, and did as any one else would without quite knowing it—took in the contents of the stateroom.

A Mexican saddle was hanging up, with holsters attached.

"That's a nice saddle," said the young passenger, examining it. "Seems familiar, too."

He lifted up the flap of the holster, and started back with a cry.

The steward looked up, and said:

"Halloo!"

"Look!" pointing to the flap of the holster. "See the name?"

"Captain Hamilton Digby," read the steward.

"You know it?"

"Know it! Who belongs here?"

"Mr. James Lee."

"Where is he?"

"On deck."

On deck went the young passenger, and sought out Mr. Lee, but did not go near him.

A sailor, passing with a lantern, swung the rays of light on Mr. Lee's pallid face. The young passenger, who had startled the steward, went below, and startled the captain.

"Captain," he said, "you have an impostor—an incendiary, and for all I know, a murderer on board."

"Good God, sir! Whom do you accuse?"

"The invalid; send for him, sir; but don't let him go to his cabin till you have spoken to him. Say you wish to see Mr. Lee. When he comes, call him Hamilton Digby. Then see how he takes it."

The captain, too staggered to ask for a full explanation, sent for Mr. Lee, who, anticipating a kindly welcome, hurried down.

"You want me, sir?"

"I want Mr. Hamilton Digby, sir."

Lee started and turned pale. The captain's suspicions were up in a minute.

"Really, captain, this is singular. I know no such person."

"Liar! who am I?"

Lee turned and staggered as if shot. A pair of great, glaring eyes confronted him—a face he too well knew.

"Owen Memphis."

"Ay, robber. Captain, look out. Keep him here, his cabin and his person must both be searched."

Captain Digby uttered a fearful shriek, and fell to the deck in a fit.

* * * * *

Well, the story was soon told on board; the state-room of the detestable villain searched, the certificate found, and handed over to Owen and the lawyer.

Rutland and Mr. Memphis readily identified Digby, and the heartless but now suffering villain was put in irons and close confinement.

Owen descended like an avalanche upon his father's relations in England, and even without the sworn testimony of Sorrell, (who was speedily progressing towards recovery) the false Sir Charles gave in.

"Pity me—pity my delicate son!" he implored. "I will go quietly away and leave you full possession."

"Not so," answered Owen, nobly; "I am still a minor. You shall be my trustee. I care nothing for the title. America is my mother country, but I will have my mother's name made spotless, and a fair provision for myself and brother in the future. I appoint Mr. Memphis, my uncle, as trustee until I am of age. Do you agree?"

"Bless—God bless you, my noble kinsman; but this is too great a sacrifice."

"It would be a still greater sacrifice to drag me back to a country and people I don't know—all I want is justice. The fortune I am willing shall be equally divided."

So it was agreed.

Between a title and his country, Owen Memphis Cardiff chose his country; and he solved the secret of his birth, and cleared the stain from his mother's name through the finding of a friend—the projector, the leader of the expedition of the Gold Hunters of Mexico.

[THE END.]

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